MAHMOUD DARWISH

A River Dies of Thirst

journals

Translated from the Arabic by Catherine Cobham

archipelago books

MAHMOUD DARWISH

A River Dies of Thirst

journals

Translated from the Arabic by Catherine Cobham

archipelago books

OceanofPDF.com

OceanofPDF.com

MAHMOUD DARWISH

A River Dies of Thirst

journals

Translated from the Arabic by Catherine Cobham

archipelago books

OceanofPDF.com

Originally published as *Athar al-Farâsha*, by Riad El-Rayyes Books, Ltd. in Beirut in 2008
Copyright © Mahmoud Darwish/Actes Sud, 2009
English translation copyright © Catherine Cobham, 2009

First Archipelago Books Edition, 2009

All Rights Reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form without prior written permission of the publisher.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Darwish, Mahmud.
[Athar al-farashah. English]
A river dies of thirst : journals = Athar al-farasha : yawmiyyat / Mahmoud Darwish ; translated by Catherine Cobham.
p. cm.
ISBN 978-1-9357446-7-2
I. Cobham, Catherine. II. Title. III. Title: Athar al-farasha.
PJ7820.A7A8713 2009
892.71'6--dc22 2009012083

Archipelago Books
232 Third Street, Suite A111
Brooklyn, NY 11215
www.archipelagobooks.org

Distributed by Consortium Book Sales and Distribution
www.cbsd.com

Cover art: “Les hiboux et les courbeaux” from the *Kalila wa Dimna* reproduced with the permission of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France

This publication was made possible with support from Lannan Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the New York State Council on the Arts, a state agency.

OceanofPDF.com

Contents

The girl/The scream
Green flies
Like a prose poem
If only I were a stone
Beyond identification
The enemy
Nero
The forest
Doves
The house as casualty
The cunning of the metaphor
The mosquito
An eagle flying low
A personal duty
A common enemy
The rest of a life
The colour yellow
If only the young were trees
We arrived too late
Two strangers
What's it all for?
A talent for hope
I am only him
I did not dream
The pretty girls' neighbour

How far is far?
He sees himself as absent
He said: ‘I’m afraid’
The roar of silence
A person chasing himself
A longing to forget
A river dies of thirst
The wall
The law of fear
I walked on my heart
Routine
A gun and a shroud
If we want to
Cheated time
Perfection
One, two, three
Empty boxes
On nothingness
My imagination . . . a faithful hunting dog
If I were someone else
Assassination
Rustling
A metaphor
In the company of things
A shawl made of silk
A sort of loss
A shameful land
Summer and winter
A coloured cloud

A spring passing quickly
Life to the last drop
The butterfly effect
I was not with me
The faces of truth
As if he were asleep
Visible music
The road to where
The humour of eternity
The indifferent one
The picture and the frame
Snow
An infectious disease
A bed of lavender
Most and least
I am jealous of everything around you
Lose one of your stars
Private meetings
She said to him
A sneeze
In praise of wine
At the top of the cypress trees
Point of view
The mercy bullet
Shyness
Perfection is the same as imperfection
Prickly pear
In the empty square
A short holiday

Fame
If I were a hunter
Nightmare
Iraq’s night is long
In Cordoba
In Madrid
High is the mountain
I don’t notice
That word
Echo
The second olive tree
Willow tree
Right of return to paradise
If it were not for sin
Italian autumn
Two travellers to a river
A killer and innocent
As if she is a song
My poet/my other
A clear sky and a green garden
A single word
The essence of the poem
Satire
On oratory and orators
Half and half
I think
The second line
Higher and further
The canary

On a boat on the Nile
The lonely man’s addiction
In Rabat
Description
In Skogås
The exile finds his way
Boulevard St Germain
Things would be different
A life beginning
The hand of the statue
In Beirut
The return of June
If only people envied us
From now on you are somebody else
From now on you are you

OceanofPDF.com

Acknowledgements

I am very grateful to Sabry Hafez for his invaluable help with the meanings and cultural contexts of a number of words and phrases. I would also like to thank John Burnside, Maudemarie Clark, David Cobham, Dina Frangi, Ronak Husni, Javier Letrán, and Tetz Rooke for their useful comments on specific linguistic, literary, or other cultural issues.

Responsibility for any mistakes and infelicities rests with me.

Catherine Cobham
St Andrews, 2009

OceanofPDF.com

A River Dies of Thirst

OceanofPDF.com

The girl/The scream

On the seashore is a girl, and the girl has a family
and the family has a house. And the house has two windows and a door
And in the sea is a warship having fun
catching promenaders on the seashore:
Four, five, seven
fall down on the sand. And the girl is saved for a while
because a hazy hand
a divine hand of some sort helps her, so she calls out: ‘Father
Father! Let’s go home, the sea is not for people like us!’
Her father doesn’t answer, laid out on his shadow
windward of the sunset
blood in the palm trees, blood in the clouds

Her voice carries her higher and further than
the seashore. She screams at night over the land
The echo has no echo
so she becomes the endless scream in the breaking news
which was no longer breaking news
when
the aircraft returned to bomb a house with two windows and a door.

Green flies

The scene is the same as ever. Summer and sweat, and an imagination incapable of seeing beyond the horizon. And today is better than tomorrow. But the dead are what's new. They're born every day and when they're trying to sleep death takes them away from their drowsiness into a sleep without dreams. It's not worth counting them. None of them asks for help from anyone. Voices search for words in the open country, and the echo comes back clearly, woundingly: 'There's nobody here.' But there's somebody who says: 'It's the killer's right to defend the killer instinct,' while the dead say belatedly: 'It's the victim's right to defend his right to scream.' The call to prayer rises to accompany the indistinguishable funerals: coffins hastily raised in the air, hastily buried – no time to carry out the rites, more dead are arriving at speed from other raids, individually or in groups, or a whole family with no orphans or grieving parents left behind. The sky is leaden grey and the sea blue grey, but the colour of blood is hidden from the camera by swarms of green flies.

Like a prose poem

An autumnal summer on the hills is like a prose poem. The breeze is a gentle rhythm I feel but do not hear in the modest little trees, and the yellowish plants are peeling images, and eloquence provokes similes with its cunning verbs. The only celebration on these mountain paths is provided by the lively sparrows, who flit between sense and nonsense. Nature is a body divesting itself of trivial adornment until the figs, grapes and pomegranates ripen and the rain awakens forgotten desires. ‘If it weren’t for my mysterious need for poetry, I wouldn’t need anything,’ says the poet, whose enthusiasm has waned so his mistakes have become less frequent. He walks because the doctors have advised him to walk, with no particular goal, to train the heart in a kind of indifference necessary for good health. Any idea that occurs to him will be purely gratuitous. The summer only rarely lends itself to verse. The summer is a prose poem which takes no interest in the eagles circling high above.

If only I were a stone

I would yearn for nothing
no yesterday passing, no tomorrow to come
and my present neither advancing nor retreating
Nothing happening to me!
If only I were a stone – I said – Oh if only I were
some stone so that water would burnish me
green, yellow – I would be placed in a room
like a sculpture, or exercises in sculpture
or material for the eruption of the necessary
from the folly of the unnecessary
If only I were a stone
so that I could yearn for something!

Beyond identification

I sit in front of the television, since I can't do anything else. There, in front of the television, I discover my feelings and see what's happening to me. Smoke is rising from me and I reach out my severed hand to pick up my scattered limbs from many bodies, and I don't find them but I don't run away from them either because pain has such an attraction. I am besieged by land and air and sea and language. The last aircraft has taken off from Beirut airport and put me in front of the television to witness the rest of my death with millions of other viewers. Nothing proves that I exist when I think, as Descartes says, but rather when I am offered up in sacrifice, now, in Lebanon. I enter the television, I and the beast. I know the beast is stronger than me in the struggle between aircraft and bird. But I have become addicted, perhaps more than I should have, to the heroism of the metaphor: the beast has swallowed me but has not digested me. I have emerged unscathed more than once. My soul, which was confused in the belly of the beast, has inhabited another body, lighter and stronger. But now I don't know where I am: in front of the television or inside it. Whereas I can see my heart, rolling like a pine cone from a Lebanese mountain to Rafah!

The enemy

I was there a month ago. I was there a year ago. I was always there as if I was never anywhere else. In 1982 the same thing happened to us as is happening now. We were besieged and killed and fought against the hell we encountered. The casualties/martyrs don't resemble one another. Each of them has a distinctive physique and distinctive features, different eyes and a different name and age. The killers are the ones who all look the same. They are one being, distributed over different pieces of hardware, pressing electronic buttons, killing and vanishing. He sees us but we don't see him, not because he's a ghost but because he's a steel mask on an idea – he is featureless, eyeless, ageless and nameless. It is he who has chosen to have a single name: the enemy.

Nero

What's going on in Nero's mind as he watches Lebanon burn? His eyes wander ecstatically and he walks like someone dancing at a wedding: This madness is my madness, I know best, so let them set light to everything beyond my control. And the children have to learn to behave themselves and stop shouting when I'm playing my tunes!

And what's going on in Nero's mind as he watches Iraq burn? Does it please him that he awakens a memory in the history of the jungle that preserves his name as an enemy of Hamurabbi and Gilgamesh and Abu Nuwas: My law is the mother of all laws, the flower of eternity grows in my fields, and poetry – what does that mean?

And what goes on in Nero's mind as he watches Palestine burn? Does it delight him that his name is recorded in the roll of prophets as a prophet that nobody's ever believed in before? As a prophet of killing who God entrusted with correcting the countless mistakes in the heavenly books: I too am God's mouthpiece!

And what goes on in Nero's mind as he watches the world burn? I am master of the Day of Judgement. Then he orders the camera to stop rolling, because he doesn't want anyone to see that his fingers are on fire at the end of this long American movie!

The forest

I couldn’t hear my voice in the forest, even if
the forest were free of the beast’s hunger
and the army defeated or victorious – there’s no difference – had returned
over the severed limbs of the unknown dead to the barracks or
the throne
And I couldn’t hear my voice in the forest, even if
the wind carried it to me, and said to me:
‘This is your voice,’ I couldn’t hear it

I couldn’t hear my voice in the forest, even if
the wolf stood on his hind legs and applauded me:
‘I can hear your voice, so give me your orders!’
And I said: ‘The forest is not in the forest
Father wolf, my son!’

I couldn’t hear my voice unless
the forest were free of me, and I were free of
the silence of the forest.

Doves

A flight of doves scatters suddenly from a break in the smoke, shining like a gleam of heavenly peace, circling between the grey and the fragments of blue above a city of rubble and reminding us that beauty still exists and that non-existence is not making complete fools of us since it promises us, or so we like to think, a revelation of how it is different from nothingness. In war none of us feels that he is dead if he feels pain. Death pre-empts pain, pain is the one blessing in war. It moves from quarter to quarter bringing a stay of execution. And if someone is befriended by luck he forgets his long-term plans and waits for the non-existent which already exists circling in a flight of doves. I see many doves in the skies of Lebanon playing with the smoke which rises from the nothingness.

The house as casualty

In one minute the entire life of a house is ended. The house as casualty is also mass murder, even if it is empty of its inhabitants. A mass grave of raw materials intended to build a structure with meaning, or a poem with no importance in time of war. The house as casualty is the severance of things from their relationships and from the names of feelings, and from the need of tragedy to direct its eloquence at seeing into the life of the object. In every object there is a being in pain – a memory of fingers, of a smell, an image. And houses are killed just like their inhabitants. And the memory of objects is killed: stone, wood, glass, iron, cement are scattered in broken fragments like living beings. And cotton, silk, linen, papers, books are torn to pieces like proscribed words. Plates, spoons, toys, records, taps, pipes, door handles, fridges, washing machines, flower vases, jars of olives and pickles, tinned food all break just like their owners. Salt, sugar, spices, boxes of matches, pills, contraceptives, antidepressants, strings of garlic, onions, tomatoes, dried okra, rice and lentils are crushed to pieces just like their owners. Rent agreements, marriage documents, birth certificates, water and electricity bills, identity cards, passports, love letters are torn to shreds like their owners' hearts. Photographs, toothbrushes, combs, cosmetics, shoes, underwear, sheets, towels fly in every direction like family secrets broadcast aloud in the devastation. All these things are a memory of the people who no longer have them and of the objects that no longer have the people – destroyed in a minute. Our things die like us, but they aren't buried with us.

The cunning of the metaphor

Metaphorically I say: ‘I won’
Metaphorically I say: ‘I lost’
And a bottomless valley stretches in front of me
and I lie in what remains of the holm oak
And there are two olive trees
surrounding me on three sides
and two birds carry me
to the side which is empty
of the peak and the abyss
so that I don’t say: ‘I won’
so that I don’t say: ‘I lost the bet.’

The mosquito

The mosquito, and I don't know what the masculine form of the word is in Arabic, is more destructive than slander. Not content with sucking your blood, it forces you into a fruitless battle. It only visits in darkness like al-Mutanabbi's fever. It buzzes and hums like a warplane which you don't hear until it has hit its target: your blood. You switch on the light to see it and it disappears into some secret corner of the room, then settles on the wall – safe, peaceful, as if it has surrendered. You try to kill it with one of your shoes, but it dodges you and escapes and reappears with an air of malicious satisfaction. You curse it loudly but it pays no heed. You negotiate a truce with it in a friendly voice: 'Sleep so that I can sleep!' You think you've convinced it and switch off the light and go to sleep. But having sucked most of your blood it starts humming again, threatening a new attack. And forces you into a subsidiary battle with your perspiration. You turn on the light again and resist the two of them, the mosquito and the sweat, by reading. But the mosquito lands on the page you are reading, and you say happily to yourself: 'It's fallen into the trap.' And you snap the book shut: 'I've killed it . . . I've killed it!' And when you open the book, to glory in your victory, there's no sign of the mosquito or the words. Your book is blank. The mosquito, and I don't know what the masculine form of the word is in Arabic, is not a metaphor, an allusion or a play on words. It's an insect which likes your blood and can smell it from twenty miles away. There's only one way you can bargain with it to make a truce: by changing your blood type.

An eagle flying low

The traveller in the poem said
to the traveller in the poem:
‘How much further do you have to go?’
‘All the way’
‘So go then, go
as if you have arrived, and not arrived’
‘If there weren’t so many ways to go, my heart would be a hoopoe and I would know the
way’
‘If your heart were a hoopoe I would follow it’
‘Who are you? What’s your name?’
‘I have no name on my journey’
‘Shall I see you again?’
‘Yes. On two mountain tops
with a loud echo and a chasm between them, I will see you’
‘And how shall we jump the chasm
as we are not birds?’
‘We will sing:
“Who sees us we cannot see
and who we see cannot see us”’
‘Then what?’
‘We won’t sing’
‘Then what?’
‘Then you ask me and I ask you:
“How much further do you have to go?”
“All the way”
“Is all the way far enough for the traveller to arrive?”
“No. But I see a fabulous eagle
circling above us, flying low!”’

A personal duty

They shouted ‘Hero!’ at him, and paraded him in public squares. Young girls’ hearts leapt at the sight of him, and from their balconies they pelted him with rice and lilies. Poets hostile to poetic convention addressed him in the rhetoric required to inflame the language: ‘Our hero! Our hope!’ And he, raised shoulder high like a victory flag, almost lost his name in the flood of epithets. Shy as a bride on her wedding day: ‘I did nothing. I was just doing my duty.’ Next morning he found himself alone, recalling a distant past that waved at him with amputated fingers: ‘Our hero! Our hope!’ He looked around and saw none of yesterday’s enthusiastic audience. He sat in lonely rooms, searching his body for traces of heroism, picking out the splinters and collecting them in a metal dish, feeling no pain. ‘The pain is not here. The pain is elsewhere. But who is listening to their cry for help now?’ He felt hungry. He searched for tins of sardines and brown beans and found they were past their sell-by date. He smiled and muttered: ‘Heroism too has its sell-by date,’ and realised he had done his patriotic duty!

A common enemy

It is time for the war to have a siesta. The fighters go to their girlfriends, tired and afraid their words will be misinterpreted: ‘We won because we did not die, and our enemies won because they did not die.’ For defeat is a forlorn expression. But the individual fighter is not a soldier in the presence of the one he loves: ‘If your eyes hadn’t been aimed at my heart the bullet would have penetrated it!’ Or: ‘If I hadn’t been so eager to avoid being killed, I wouldn’t have killed anyone!’ Or: ‘I was afraid for you if I died, so I survived to put your mind at rest.’ Or: ‘Heroism is a word we only use at the graveside.’ Or: ‘In battle I did not think of victory but of being safe, and of the freckles on your back.’ Or: ‘How little difference there is between safety and peace and the room where you sleep.’ Or: ‘When I was thirsty I asked my enemy for water and he didn’t hear me, so I spoke your name and my thirst was quenched.’ Fighters on both sides say similar things in the presence of the ones they love. But the casualties on both sides don’t realise until it’s too late that they have a common enemy: death. So what does that mean?

The rest of a life

If someone said to me: ‘You’re going to die here this evening
so what will you do in the time that remains?’ I would say
‘I will look at my watch
drink a glass of juice
and crunch on an apple
and observe at length an ant that has found her day’s supply of food
Then look at my watch:
there is still time to shave
and take a long shower. A thought will occur to me:
One should look nice to write
so I’ll wear something blue
I will sit until noon, alive, at my desk
not seeing a trace of colour in the words
white, white, white

I will prepare my last meal
pour wine into two glasses: for me
and an unexpected guest
then take a nap between two dreams
but the sound of my snoring will wake me
Then I will look at my watch:
there is still time to read
I will read a canto of Dante and half a *mu‘allaqa*
and see how my life goes from me
into other people, and not wonder who
will take its place’
‘Just like that?’
‘Just like that’
‘Then what?’
‘I will comb my hair
and throw the poem, this poem

in the rubbish bin
put on the latest shirt from Italy
say my final farewell to myself with a backing of Spanish violins
then
walk
to the graveyard!’

The colour yellow

Yellow flowers make the room lighter. They are looking at me, rather than me looking at them. They are the first messengers of spring. A woman, who is not distracted by war from studying the disfigured nature left to us, gave them to me. I envy her this focus that transports her far away from our fragile life. I envy her the way she embroiders time with a needle and yellow thread broken off from the sun, which hasn't been occupied. I gaze at the yellow flowers and feel they are lighting me up and dissolving my darkness, and I grow less heavy, finer, and we end up reflecting one another's translucence. I am seduced by a metaphor: yellow is the colour of the hoarse voice that only the sixth sense can hear. A voice whose tone is neutral, the voice of the sunflower, which does not change its religion and always worships the sun. If there is any point to jealousy – which is supposed to be the same colour as the sunflower – then it is that we view our surroundings with the heroic spirit of one defeated, and learn to focus on correcting our mistakes in honourable contests.

If only the young were trees

The tree is sister to the tree, or its good neighbour. The big one is kind to the little one, giving it the shade it needs. The tall one is kind to the short one, sending it a bird to keep it company at night. No tree attacks the fruit of another tree, and if one tree is barren the other does not make fun of it. A tree does not attack another tree and does not imitate a woodcutter. When a tree becomes a boat it learns to swim. When it becomes a door it continues to keep secrets. When it becomes a chair it does not forget the sky that was once above it. When it becomes a table it teaches the poet not to be a woodcutter. The tree is forgiveness and vigilance. It neither sleeps nor dreams, but is entrusted with the secrets of dreamers, standing guard night and day, showing respect to passers-by and to the heavens. The tree is a standing prayer, directing its devotions upwards. When it bends a little in the storm, it bends majestically, like a nun, looking upwards all the time. In the past the poet said: ‘If only the young were stones.’ He should have said: ‘If only the young were trees!’

We arrived too late

At a light-hearted stage of life we call maturity we are neither optimistic nor pessimistic. We have renounced passion and longing, and calling things by their opposites because we were so confused between form and essence, and we have practised thinking calmly before expressing ourselves. Wisdom has procedures similar to those of a doctor examining a wound. As we look behind us to see where we stand in relation to ourselves and reality, we ask: ‘How many mistakes have we made? Have we come to wisdom too late?’ We are unsure which way the wind is blowing, for what is the use of achieving anything too late, even if there is someone waiting for us on the mountainside, inviting us to offer up a prayer of thanksgiving because we have arrived safe and sound, neither optimistic nor pessimistic, but too late?

Two strangers

He looks upwards
and sees a star
looking at him

He looks into the valley
and sees his grave
looking at him

He looks at a woman
who torments and delights him
and she does not look at him

He looks in the mirror
and sees a stranger like him
looking at him.

What's it all for?

Walking on his own, he passes the time by holding a brief conversation with himself. Meaningless words, which are not meant to mean anything: 'What's it all for?' He hadn't intended to grumble or ask questions, or rub one phrase against another to ignite a rhythm to help him walk at a young man's pace. But that's what happened. Every time he repeated 'What's it all for?' he felt a friend was keeping him company on his walk. Passers-by regarded him indifferently. Nobody thought he was mad. They thought he was a dreamy, absent-minded poet receiving sudden inspiration from a demon. Nor did he consider he was doing anything wrong. He doesn't know why he thought of Genghis Khan. Perhaps because he saw a horse without a saddle floating in the air above a ruined building in the valley basin. He continued walking to the same rhythm: 'What's it all for?' Before he reached the end of the road he walks every evening, he saw an old man go over to a eucalyptus tree, lean his stick against its trunk, undo his fly with a trembling hand and say, as he peed, 'What's it all for?' And the girls climbing up from the valley, not content with laughing at the old man, threw hard, fresh pistachios at him.

A talent for hope

When he thought about hope he felt weary and bored, and constructed a mirage and said: ‘How shall I evaluate my mirage?’ He searched in his desk drawers for the person he was before asking this question, but found no notes containing thoughtless or destructive urges. Nor did he find a document confirming he had stood in the rain for no reason. When he thought about hope, the gap widened between a body that was no longer agile and a heart that had acquired wisdom. He did not repeat the question ‘Who am I?’ because he was so upset by the smell of lilies and the neighbours’ loud music. He opened the window on what remained of a horizon and saw two cats playing with a puppy in the narrow street, and a dove building a nest in a chimney, and he said: ‘Hope is not the opposite of despair. Perhaps it is the faith that springs from divine indifference which has left us dependent on our own special talents to make sense of the fog surrounding us.’ He said: ‘Hope is neither something tangible nor an idea. It is a talent.’ He took a beta blocker, putting the question of hope aside, and for some obscure reason felt quite happy.

I am only him

Far away, behind his footsteps
wolves bite moonbeams

Far away, ahead of his footsteps
stars light up the treetops

Close to him
blood flows from the veins of stones

Therefore he walks and walks and walks
until he melts away
and the shadows swallow him up at the end of this journey

I am only him
and he is only me
in different images.

I did not dream

Noticing how many of my dreams are lost, I stop myself demanding too much water from the mirage. I confess I have grown tired of long dreams that take me back to the point where they begin and I end, without us ever meeting in the morning. I will make my dreams from my daily bread to avoid disappointment. For dreaming is not seeing the unseen, in the form of an object of desire, but not knowing you are dreaming. However, you have to know how to wake up. Waking up is when the real arises from the imaginary in a revised version, when poetry returns safely from the heavenly realms of elevated language to an earth that doesn't resemble its poetic image. Can I choose my dreams, so that I do not dream of the unattainable, so that I become a different person who dreams that he can tell the difference between a live man who thinks he is dead and a dead man who thinks he is alive? I am alive, and when I'm not dreaming I say: 'I didn't dream, and it did me no harm.'

The pretty girls' neighbour

He walks along the same road, at the same time of day, content with the chance the evening offers him to savour the air at leisure. He is sad when he notices the growing decline in the number of olive trees, while the buildings grow bigger, like our sufferings, and the amount of space diminishes. But the young girls grow more numerous, older, more mature, and do not fear time lying in wait for them at the end of the road that descends into the valley. He looks at them without desire and they look curiously back at him and say: 'Good evening, Uncle!' He loves them without a lump the size of a quince constricting his breathing, celebrates the beauty of their freshness, and the freshness of their hopes, as he would music, a watercolour, a blue-tailed bird. They want time to move fast so they can paint their nails a provocative red and wear high heels that crack walnuts and make people jump. He wants time to slow down so he can prolong the enjoyment of walking among them, of being next to this self-contained beauty. It doesn't matter that he remembers that when he was younger he would envy himself as he walked, on other roads, with a beautiful girl, and say: 'Is this really all mine?' Then he continues along the street alone. He counts the remaining olive trees on his fingers and delights in the gazelles leaping around him unconcernedly, and envies nobody, least of all himself.

How far is far?

How far is far?
How many ways to get there?
We walk
and walk towards meaning
and don't arrive

It is a mirage
guide of the confused
to distant water
futile and heroic

We walk, and in the desert
we grow wiser
and don't say: 'Because the wilderness is perfection'

But our wisdom needs a song
with a lively tempo
so that hope doesn't flag

How far is far?
How many ways to get there?

He sees himself as absent

I've been here for ten years. This evening I sit in the small garden on my plastic chair and look at the place, intoxicated by the red stone. I count the steps leading up to my room on the second floor. Eleven steps. To the right is a large fig tree overshadowing some small peach trees, to the left a Lutheran church, and beside the stone steps an abandoned well and a rusty bucket and unwatered flowers soaking up little drops of the night's first milky dew. I'm here with forty other people to see a play with little dialogue about the curfew, whose forgotten protagonists are dotted about the garden and on the steps and the large balcony. An improvised play, or a work in progress, like our life. I steal a glance at my open window and say to myself: 'Am I up there?' I enjoy rolling the question down the steps and integrating it into the elements of the play. In the last act everything will remain unchanged. The fig tree in the garden. The Lutheran church facing it. Sunday in its usual place on the calendar, and the abandoned well and the rusty bucket. But I will be neither in my room nor in the garden. This is what the text demands: someone has to be absent to lighten the burden of the place.

He said: ‘I’m afraid’

He was afraid. He said in a loud voice: ‘I’m afraid.’ The windows were firmly closed, and the echo rose and spread: ‘I’m afraid.’ He was silent, but the walls repeated: ‘I’m afraid.’ The door, chairs, tables, curtains, rugs, candles, pens and pictures all said: ‘I’m afraid.’ Fear was afraid and shouted: ‘Enough!’ But the echo did not reply: ‘Enough!’ He was afraid to stay in the house and went out into the street. He saw a mangled poplar tree and was afraid to look at it for some unknown reason. A military vehicle drove by at speed and he was afraid to walk along the street. He was afraid to go back into the house but had no choice. He was afraid he had left the key inside, and when he found it in his pocket he was reassured. He was afraid the electricity had been cut off. He pressed the switch in the passage leading to the stairs and the light came on, so he was reassured. He was afraid he would slip on the stairs and break his pelvis, but it didn’t happen so he was reassured. He put the key in the lock and was afraid the door wouldn’t open, but it did, so he was reassured. He went inside and was afraid he had left himself sitting on the chair, afraid. When he was sure that he was the one who had entered the house, and not somebody else, he stood in front of the mirror, and when he recognised his face in the mirror, he was reassured. He listened to the silence, and did not hear anything saying: ‘I’m afraid,’ and was reassured. For some obscure reason, he was no longer afraid.

The roar of silence

I listen to the silence. Is there such a thing as silence? If we were to forget its name and listen intently to what is in it, we would hear the sound of the winds roaming in space and the cries that have found their way back to the earliest caves. Silence is a sound which has evaporated and disappeared in the wind and fragmented into echoes preserved in cosmic water jars. If we were to listen intently, we would hear the thud of the apple against a stone in God's garden, Abel's cry of fear when he first sees his own blood, the original moans of desire between a man and a woman who don't know what they are doing. We would hear Jonah's meditations in the belly of the whale and the secret negotiations between the ancient gods. If we were to listen intently to what is behind the veil of silence, we would hear nocturnal conversations between the prophets and their wives, the rhythms of the earliest poetry, sybarites complaining of boredom, horses' hooves in a war in an unspecified time and place, the music accompanying the sacred ritual of debauchery, Gilgamesh's tears over his friend Enkidu, the monkey's bewilderment as he jumps from out of the trees to occupy the throne of the tribe, Sarah and Hagar exchanging insults. If we were to listen intently to the sound of silence, we would talk less.

A person chasing himself

As if you were someone else indifferent
you did not wait for anyone
You walked along the pavement
I walked behind you disconcerted
If you were me I would say to you:
‘Wait for me at sunset’
And you would not say: ‘If you were me
the stranger would not need the stranger’
The sun smiled at the hills. And we smiled
at the women passing. And none of the women said:
‘There’s someone talking to himself’
You did not wait for anyone
You walked along your pavement indifferent
and I walked behind you disconcerted
and the sun set behind us
and you took a step or two towards me
and did not find me standing there or walking on
And I went up to you and did not find you
Was I alone without realising
That I was alone? None of the women said
‘There’s somebody
chasing himself.’

A longing to forget

Darkness. I fell off the bed troubled by a question: Where am I? I searched for my body and felt it searching for me. I looked for the light switch so that I could see what was happening to me, but couldn't find it. I tripped over my chair and knocked it over and it knocked me over onto I don't know what. Like a blind man seeing with his fingers, I felt around for a wall to lean against and collided with a wardrobe. I opened it and my hand came into contact with clothes, which I sniffed and found smelt of me. I realised I was in my own domain but had become separated from it. I continued the search for the light switch to see if this was true, and found it. I recognised my things: my bed, my book, my suitcase, and the person in pyjamas was more or less me. I opened the window and heard dogs barking in the valley. But I didn't remember when I had returned, couldn't recall standing on the bridge. I thought I must be only dreaming that I was here. I washed my face in cold water and was convinced I was awake. I went to the kitchen and saw fresh fruit and unwashed dishes, indicating that I'd had an evening meal here. But when was that? I flicked through my passport and realised I had arrived that day, but couldn't remember going away. Had some gap opened up in my memory? Had my mental existence split off from my physical one? I was scared and called a friend, even though it was late at night: 'There's something wrong with my memory. Where am I?' 'You're in Ramallah.' 'When did I get here?' 'Today. We were together this afternoon in Vatche Garden.' 'Why don't I remember? Do you think I'm ill?' 'It's not the illness you're thinking of: it's the longing to forget!'

A river dies of thirst

A river was here
and it had two banks
and a heavenly mother who nursed it on drops from the clouds
A small river moving slowly
descending from the mountain peaks
visiting villages and tents like a charming lively guest
bringing oleander trees and date palms to the valley
and laughing to the nocturnal revellers on its banks:
‘Drink the milk of the clouds
and water the horses
and fly to Jerusalem and Damascus’
Sometimes it sang heroically
at others passionately
It was a river with two banks
and a heavenly mother who nursed it on drops from the clouds
But they kidnapped its mother
so it ran short of water
and died, slowly, of thirst.

The wall

A huge metal snake coils around us, swallowing up the little walls that separate our bedroom, bathroom, kitchen and living room. A snake that does not move in a straight line, to avoid resembling us as we look straight on. It twists and turns, a nightmare of cement segments reinforced with pliant metal, making it easy for it to move into the fragmented bits of land and beds of mint that are left to us. A snake eager to lay its eggs between our inhalations and exhalations so that we say for once, because we are nearly choking to death, ‘We are the strangers.’ When we look in our mirrors all we see is the snake making for the backs of our necks, but with a bit of effort we can see what is above it: a sky yawning with boredom at the architects adorning it with guns and flags. And at night we see it twinkling with stars, which gaze at us with affection. We also see what lies behind the snake wall: the watchmen in the ghetto, frightened of what we’re doing behind the little walls we still have left. We see them oiling their weapons to kill the gryphon they think is hiding in our hen coop. And we cannot help laughing.

The law of fear

The killer looks at the spectre of the dead man, not into his eyes, without regret. He says to those around him: ‘Don’t blame me. I’m afraid. I killed because I’m afraid, and I’ll kill again because I’m afraid.’ Some of those present, accustomed to favouring psychological analysis over the laws of justice, say: ‘He is defending himself.’ Others, admirers of the idea that progress is superior to morality, say: ‘Justice emanates from the generosity of power. The victim should apologise for the trauma he has caused the killer.’ Scholars of the distinction between life and reality say: ‘If this ordinary event had taken place anywhere but here, in this holy land, would we have even known the victim’s name? Let us then turn our attention to comforting the frightened man.’ When they went down the road of sympathising with the killer, some foreign tourists passing by asked them: ‘What has the child done wrong?’ They answered: ‘He will grow up and frighten the frightened man’s son.’ ‘What has the woman done wrong?’ They said: ‘She will give birth to a memory.’ ‘What has the tree done wrong?’ They said: ‘A green bird will appear from it.’ And they shouted: ‘Fear, not justice, is the basis of power.’ The spectre of the dead man appeared to them from a cloudless sky and when they opened fire on him they did not see a single drop of blood, and they were afraid.

I walked on my heart

I walked on my heart, as if my heart
were a road, or a pavement, or air
and my heart said: ‘I have tired of identifying
with things, when space has broken into pieces
and I have tired of your question: “Where shall we go
when there’s no land there, and no sky?”
And you obey me. Give me an order
direct me to do what you want’
So I said to my heart: ‘I have forgotten you since we set off
with you as my reason, and me the one speaking
Rebel against me as much as you can, and run
for there’s nothing behind us except what’s behind.’

Routine

Low pressure area. Northwesterly winds, heavy showers. Grey wrinkled sea. Tall cypresses. Today the autumn clouds let thirty martyrs fall in the north of Gaza, among them two women taking part in a demonstration to demand a share of hope for their kind. Clear skies. Calm blue sea. Northerly winds. Good visibility. But the autumn clouds – the symbolic name for killing – wipe out an entire family, made up of seventeen lives. The news searches for their names under the rubble. Apart from that, abnormal life appears to be running its normal course. The Devil still boasts of his long quarrel with God. Individuals, if they wake up alive, can still say ‘Good morning,’ then go off to their normal jobs: burying the dead. They don’t know if they will return safely to what remains of houses encircled by bulldozers and tanks and smashed cypress trees. Life is so indifferent it seems to be no more than a rough draft of some stubborn urge to have one’s presence registered: equal rights with jackals to enjoy a safe cave. But we have a difficult mission to perform: mediation between God and the Devil to get them to call a brief truce so that we can bury our martyrs.

A gun and a shroud

‘Nobody will ever defeat me, or be defeated by me,’ said the masked security man, charged with some obscure task. He fired into the air and said: ‘Only the bullet should know who my enemy is.’ The air responded with a similar bullet. The unemployed passers-by weren’t interested in what went on in the mind of a masked security man, out of work like them, but he was seeking his own private war since he hadn’t found a peace to defend. He looked at the sky and it was high and clear. As he didn’t like poetry he couldn’t see the sky as a mirror of the sea. He was hungry, and his hunger increased when he smelled falafel, and he felt his gun despised him. He fired up at the sky in case a bunch of grapes might fall on him from paradise. He was answered by a bullet, which kindled his suppressed enthusiasm for a fight. He rushed forth into an imaginary war and said: ‘At last I’ve found work. This is war.’ He fired on another masked security man, hit his imaginary enemy and received a trifling wound to his leg. When he returned home to the camp, leaning on his rifle, he found the house crowded with mourners and smiled because he thought they thought he had been martyred. He said: ‘I’m not dead!’ When they informed him that he had killed his brother, he looked contemptuously at his gun and said: ‘I’m going to sell it to buy a shroud worthy of my brother.’

If we want to

We will become a people, if we want to, when we learn that we are not angels, and that evil is not the prerogative of others

We will become a people when we stop reciting a prayer of thanksgiving to the sacred nation every time a poor man finds something to eat for his dinner

We will become a people when we can sniff out the sultan's gatekeeper and the sultan without a trial

We will become a people when a poet writes an erotic description of a dancer's belly

We will become a people when we forget what the tribe tells us, when the individual recognises the importance of small details

We will become a people when a writer can look up at the stars without saying: 'Our country is loftier and more beautiful!'

We will become a people when the morality police protect a prostitute from being beaten up in the streets

We will become a people when the Palestinian only remembers his flag on the football pitch, at camel races, and on the day of the Nakba

We will become a people, if we want to, when the singer is allowed to chant a verse of Surat al-Rahman at a mixed wedding reception

We will become a people when we respect the right, and the wrong.

Cheated time

Because nobody ever arrives on time, and because waiting is like sitting on a hot tin roof, he put his watch back twenty minutes. In this way he made the torment of waiting easier to bear, and forgot about it. But since he cheated time he hasn't been on time for anything. He sits on his suitcase in the station waiting for a train that never comes, without realising that it went exactly on time, and it was he who was late. He goes back home disappointed. He opens his suitcase and returns its contents to the drawers like anyone coming back from a trip. Then he asks himself angrily: 'Why don't people respect time?' When death knocks on his door, asking permission to enter, he reproaches it, saying: 'Why are you twenty minutes early?' He hides in the bathroom, and does not open the door to it, as if he had died in the bathroom!

Perfection

Azure space, high and wide and washed with light. If a small cloud appears like a soap bubble, it dissolves at once into a forgotten poem. Circular space borne on towering forest trees and seagulls' wings, or on a camel litter, remembered by pilgrims to the holy land. Vast space perfectly formed and coloured, so perfect I am afraid of a forest fire, an attack on the seagulls, an assault on a prophet's wife, some random breach in the order of things. And I am afraid of writing a cadenced poem on such a delicate surface.

One, two, three

The actor climbed up on stage with the sound technician: ‘One, two, three. Stop! We’ll try the sound again: One, two, three, stop! Would you prefer a bit more echo?’ He said: ‘I don’t know. Do whatever you want!’ The auditorium was completely empty, hundreds of wooden seats staring at him, silent as a communal grave, urging him to leave or to join them. He preferred the second option, chose a seat in the middle of the front row and went to sleep. The director woke him up for the final run through. He went up on stage and improvised a long section, as he liked the idea of addressing empty seats and no one applauding him but the director. Then he improvised another section without a hitch. In the evening, when the auditorium was full and the curtain went up, he stood there confident in the silence. He looked at the front row and remembered himself sitting there and grew confused. He forgot the written text, and the improvised text evaporated into thin air. He forgot the audience and made do with repeating the sound test: ‘One, two, three.’ He repeated ‘One, two, three’ until he fainted and the theatre resounded with applause.

Empty boxes

If peace is a pause between two wars, then the dead have a right to vote: we will choose the general. If war is an accident on the motorway, then the living have a duty to vote: we will choose the donkey. But the living did not go to the ballot box, not because the snow was falling in big flakes, but because a sudden paralysis afflicted the city's inhabitants, and when they opened their windows they saw spiders spinning their webs in the snow and went blind. When they tried to hear what was going on, storms arose, whose wild sounds were unfamiliar to them, and they went deaf. The astrologers said: 'It is the chaos of existence at the door of the last judgement.' Luckily or unluckily for us, foreign historians, experts on our destinies and our oral history, were not here, so we don't know what happened to us!

On nothingness

It is nothingness leading us to nothing
We gazed at nothingness searching for its meanings
and were stripped of nothingness by something resembling nothingness
and missed the absurdity of nothingness
for it is more attractive than something that makes us into things
The slave loves an oppressor
because venerating nothingness in an idol deifies it
and he hates it
if his awe encounters something
he thinks is visible and ordinary
So the slave loves a tyrant like him
appearing from another nothing
thus nothingness is begotten by another nothing
What is this nothingness, master of reinvention
multifaceted, tyrannical, overweening, unctuous
a joker? What is this nothingness?

Perhaps it is a spiritual illness
or a hidden energy
or, perhaps, a satirist experienced
in describing our condition.

My imagination . . . a faithful hunting dog

I was on my way to nowhere in particular, a gentle drizzle making me slightly damp, when an apple with no resemblance to Newton's apple fell on me from the clouds. I reached out my hand to pick it up and could neither feel nor see it. I stared up at the clouds and saw tufts of cotton wool driven northwards by the wind, away from the water tanks crouched on the roofs of the buildings. The light poured brightly down onto the asphalt, spreading out gleefully in the absence of pedestrians and cars, and perhaps laughing at my uneven progress. Where is the apple that fell on me? I wondered. Maybe my imagination, which is independent from me, picked it up and ran off with it. I said: 'I will follow it to the house where we live together in adjoining rooms.' There on the table I found a sheet of paper on which was written, in green ink, one line: 'An apple fell on me from the clouds,' and I knew my imagination was a faithful hunting dog.

If I were someone else

Solitude is good training for being self-reliant. He writes the phrase and looks at the ceiling. Then he adds: To be alone . . . to be able to be alone is an educational experience. Solitude is choosing a sort of pain, training to conjugate the verbs of the heart with the freedom of the self-sufficient, or being more or less detached from your exterior self and forced to plunge inside yourself without a parachute. You sit on your own, like an idea unencumbered by argumentation, not trying to guess the content of the dialogue between outside and in. Solitude is a filter, not a mirror. You throw what is in your left hand into your right, and nothing changes in this gesture of transition from non-thought to non-meaning. But this harmless nonsense isn't getting us anywhere: and what if I were alone? Solitude is the choice of someone with an abundance of possibilities – the choice of the free. When you are bored and fed up, you say: If I were someone else I would abandon this blank sheet of paper and set out to imitate a Japanese novel whose writer climbs to the top of a mountain to see what the birds of prey have done to his dead ancestors. Maybe he is still writing, and his dead are still dying. But I lack the expertise and the metaphysical toughness. And you say: If I were someone else, as I am now, I would go down into the bottom of the valley where a girl is arousing her suppressed desire with a rough fig leaf and grabbing at her panties, but I lack the narrative skill and daring required to write pornography.

Assassination

The critics kill me sometimes:
they want a particular poem
a particular metaphor
and if I stray up a side road
they say: ‘He has betrayed the road’
And if I find eloquence in grass
they say: ‘He has abandoned the steadfastness of the holm oak’
And if I see the rose in spring as yellow
they ask: ‘Where is the blood of the homeland in its petals?’
And if I write: ‘It is the butterfly my youngest sister
at the garden door’
they stir the meaning with a soup spoon
And if I whisper: ‘A mother is a mother, when she loses her child
she withers and dries up like a stick’
they say: ‘She trills with joy and dances at his funeral
for his funeral is his wedding’

And if I look up at the sky to see
the unseen
they say: ‘Poetry has strayed far from its objectives’
The critics kill me sometimes
and I escape from their reading
and thank them for their misunderstanding
then search for my new poem.

Rustling

Like one responding to a hidden inspiration, I listen attentively to the sound of the leaves in the summer trees . . . a shy, soothing sound descending from the far reaches of sleep . . . a faint sound smelling of wheat from an isolated spot in the countryside . . . a fragmented sound divided into improvised sections on the strings of a leisurely breeze, no part too diffuse or longwinded. Leaves in summer whisper modestly, call out shyly, as if to me alone, stealing me away from the burden of material existence to a place of delicate radiance: there, behind the hills, and beyond the imagination, where the visible equals the invisible, I float outside myself in sunless light. After a short sleep like an awakening, or an awakening like a short sleep, the rustling of the trees restores me to myself, cleansed of misgivings and apprehensions. I do not ask the meaning of this sound: if it is a leaf whispering confidences to its sister in the emptiness, or the breeze longing for a siesta. A voice without words rocks me, kneads me and forms me into a vessel which exudes a substance neither from it nor in it, like a feeling searching for someone to feel it.

A metaphor

On this blue day, you stand for a long time on a high mountain and stare at clouds merging together, covering land and sea. You think you are higher than yourself, like a bird existing only in a metaphor. The metaphor entices you to break away from it and look at the empty sky, like a blue desert without a mirage to be seen. Then the metaphor calls you back to its source and you cannot find a way through the clouds.

On this blue night, you see the mountains looking at the stars and the stars looking at the mountains. You think they can see you, so you thank them for their affable company. You are reluctant to emerge from the metaphor in case you fall into the well of loneliness.

In the company of things

We were guests of things, most of them
care less than us when we leave them

A traveller weeps, and the river laughs at her:
pass by, for a river is much the same at the beginning as at the end

Nothing waits. Things are indifferent
to us, and we greet them and are grateful to them

But since we call them our feelings
we believe in the name. Is their essence in the name?

We are the guests of things, most of us
forget our initial feelings, and deny them.

A shawl made of silk

A shawl on a tree branch. A girl has passed by here, or the wind, and hung her shawl on the tree. This is not a piece of information, but the opening of a poem by a poet who is at ease, and who no longer suffers from love, so he has begun to view it – from a distance – like a beautiful pastoral scene. He has put himself in the scene: the willow tree is tall, the shawl made of silk. This indicates that the girl used to meet her boy in summer and they would sit on the dry grass. It also means that they used to lure birds to a secret wedding, for the broad horizon in front of them on this hill is attractive to birds. Perhaps he said to her: 'I long for you when you are with me, as if you were far away.' And perhaps she said to him: 'I embrace you when you are far away, as if you were my breasts.' Perhaps he said to her: 'I melt at your glances and become music.' And perhaps she said to him: 'Your hand on my knee makes time sweat, so rub me so that I melt away.' The poet becomes increasingly involved in describing the silk shawl, not noticing that it is a cloud that happens to be passing between the branches of the tree at sunset.

A sort of loss

I climb up from this valley, making my own way, unaided. I climb a steep hill to see the sea. I am not borne along by a song, or a misunderstanding with the essence of things. I amuse myself by dodging my shadow and thinking cheerfully about where a rainbow ends, and this distracts me suddenly from my shadow, which has become entangled in a thorn bush and is injured but not bleeding. I bend down to help free it and get pricked by a thorn. I imagine, to begin with, that the drop of blood on my hand is a reflection of one of the colours of the rainbow. But a slight pain in my hand makes me aware that what the sunlight does with a body of airborne moisture is something else. I bind my trifling injury with a paper handkerchief and continue climbing the steep hill to see the sea. But the clouds grow thicker and cover the low ground and the outlying areas and the sea, which has been taken prisoner in one of the wars. Night falls, and the lights of the settlements appear on all sides. When I descend the steep hill into the valley, making my own way, unaided, I remember I have left my shadow hanging on a thorn bush. I don't know if I am sad or not, as a literary loss such as this is not worth recording. I say: 'Tomorrow I will climb a higher hill to see the sea beyond the settlements. But I will strap my shadow to me so I don't lose it again.'

A shameful land

This is a confined land that we inhabit and that inhabits us. A confined land, not big enough for a short meeting between a prophet and a general. If two cocks fight over a hen and their pride, their feathers fly off the walls. A confined land with no intimacy for a male and female dove to mate. A shameful land. A land yellow in summer, where the thorns carve notches in the surface of the rocks to pass the time, even if our poetry says the opposite, and supplies it with anthologies of descriptions of paradise to satisfy the hunger for beautiful things felt by those seeking to preserve their identity. We, narrators of the documents, official and poetic, required to be produced spontaneously, know that the sky will never abandon its many works to give evidence. A confined land, and we love it and believe it loves us, living or dead. We love it and know it is not big enough for brazen laughter, or a nun's prayer, or to hang washing out of reach of the neighbours' prying eyes, not big enough for the fourteenth line of a translated sonnet. A confined land with no area big enough for a proper battle with an external enemy, and no hall large enough for people to meet in to construct an extensive preamble to a spurious peace. In spite of this, or because of it, people say that a discontented god chose it as a cave to retreat to, a place to hide from the uninvited guests, who immediately stole our rams' horns and used them as weapons to keep us away from the door of the holy cave.

Summer and winter

There is nothing new. The seasons here are two:
a summer as long as a far away minaret
and a winter like a nun humbly praying
As for spring
it cannot stop
except to say: ‘Greetings to you
on Ascension Day’
While autumn
is merely a place of seclusion
in which to contemplate how much of our life we have lost
on the return journey
‘Where did we leave our life behind?’ I asked the butterfly
circling around in the light
and it burnt up in its tears.

A coloured cloud

As I wash the dishes I am filled with an invigorating emptiness and amuse myself with the soap bubbles. The water comes out of the tap with a rhythm that demands music. I accompany it with bursts of whistling and a phrase from a nondescript popular song. I play with the lather, which is like a cloud in which seasonal colours gleam then fade. I grasp the cloud in my hand and distribute it over the plates, glasses, cups, spoons and knives. It inflates as drops of water run over it. I scoop it up and make it fly through the air and it laughs at me, and my sense of having time to spare increases. My mind is blank, as indifferent as the noonday heat. But images of memories descend from afar and land in the bowl of water, neutral memories, neither painful nor joyful, such as a walk in a pine forest, or waiting for a bus in the rain, and I wash them as intently as if I had a literary crystal vase in my hands. When I am sure they're not broken, they return safely to where they came from in the pine forest, and I remain here. I play with the soapy lather and forget what is absent. I look contentedly at my mind, as clear as the kitchen glass, and at my heart, as free of stains as a carefully washed plate. When I feel completely sated with invigorating emptiness, I fill it with words of interest to nobody but me: these words!

A spring passing quickly

‘The spring has passed quickly
like a thought
that has flown from the mind’
said the anxious poet

In the beginning, its rhythm pleased him
so he went on line by line
hoping the form would burst forth

He said: ‘A different rhyme
would help me to sing
so my heart would be untroubled and the horizon clear’

The spring has passed us by
It waited for no one
The shepherd’s crook did not wait for us
nor did the basil

He sang, and found no meaning
and was enraptured
by the rhythm of a song that had lost its way

He said: ‘Perhaps meaning is born
by chance
and perhaps my spring is this unease.’

Life to the last drop

If someone said to me again: ‘Supposing you were to die tomorrow, what would you do?’ I wouldn’t need any time to reply. If I felt drowsy, I would sleep. If I was thirsty, I would drink. If I was writing, I might like what I was writing and ignore the question. If I was having lunch, I would add a little mustard and pepper to the slice of grilled meat. If I was shaving, I might cut my earlobe. If I was kissing my girlfriend, I would devour her lips as if they were figs. If I was reading, I would skip a few pages. If I was peeling an onion, I would shed a few tears. If I was walking, I would continue walking at a slower pace. If I existed, as I do now, then I wouldn’t think about not existing. If I didn’t exist, then the question wouldn’t bother me. If I was listening to Mozart, I would already be close to the realms of the angels. If I was asleep, I would carry on sleeping and dream blissfully of gardenias. If I was laughing, I would cut my laughter by half out of respect for the information. What else could I do, even if I was braver than an idiot and stronger than Hercules?

The butterfly effect

The butterfly effect is invisible
The butterfly effect is always there

It is the attraction of mysterious things
which entice meaning, and depart
when the way becomes clear

It is the lightness of the eternal in the everyday
a longing for loftier things
a beautiful brightness

It is a beauty spot in the light signalling
when we are guided towards words
by an impulse within us

It is like a song trying
to say something, and being content
to borrow from the shadows
and say nothing

The butterfly effect is invisible
The butterfly effect is always there.

I was not with me

Staring at the ceiling, resting my face on my hand, like somebody stealing up on a fresh idea, or lying in wait for a gleam of inspiration. After a few hours I realise I wasn't there on the ceiling, or here on the chair, and my mind was blank. I was absorbed in nothing, in total, complete emptiness, separated from my being, sheltered by a benign absence, and free from pain. I was neither sad nor happy, for nothingness has no connection to emotion or to time. Not a single memory shook me awake from this trance, and no fear of my fate disturbed my obliviousness to the future. For some reason, I was sure I would live until tomorrow. I could not hear the sound of the rain shattering the smell of the breeze outside, or the flutes bearing the inside away. I was nothing in the presence of nothing, and I was calm, trusting, confident. For how lovely it is for a person to be nothing, only once, no more!

The faces of truth

Truth is a metaphorical female
when fire and water mix
in its form

Truth is relativity
when blood mixes with blood
in its night

Truth is plain as day
when the victim walks
with amputated legs
slowly

And truth is a character
in the poem
It is not what it is
or its opposite
It is what falls in drops from its shadow.

As if he were asleep

He woke up all at once. He opened the window onto a faint light, a clear sky and a refreshing breeze. He felt his body, limb by limb, and found it was intact. He looked at the pillow and saw that no hairs had fallen out in the night. He looked at the sheet and saw no blood. He switched on the radio and there were no reports of new killings in Iraq or Gaza or Afghanistan. He thought he was asleep. He rubbed his eyes in the mirror and recognised his face easily. He shouted: 'I'm alive.' He went into the kitchen to prepare coffee. He put a spoonful of honey in a glass of fat-free milk. On the balcony he saw a visiting canary perched on a tub of flowers he'd forgotten to water. He said good morning to the canary and scattered some breadcrumbs for it. The canary flew away and alighted on the branch of a bush and began to sing. Again, he thought he must be asleep. He looked in the mirror once more and said: 'That's me.' He listened to the latest news report. No new killings anywhere. He was delighted by this peculiar morning. His delight led him to the writing desk, with one line in his head: 'I'm alive even though I feel no pain.' He was filled with a passionate desire to make poetry, because of a crystal clarity that had descended upon him from some distant place: from the place where he was now! When he sat at the writing desk he found the line 'I'm alive even though I feel no pain,' written on a blank sheet of paper. This time he didn't just think he was asleep. He was sure of it.

Visible music

When I listen to music gardens open out around me, and the melody becomes a flower I hear with my eyes. Sound has an image, and this image has a sound, which slowly gathers momentum like waves, more far-reaching than a literary metaphor. Carnations leave their flower beds and are distributed on the tables of high-class restaurants to compensate a stranger for some forgotten loss, or make a diner waiting for his companion better prepared to face the uncertainties of their encounter. Nobody stops the narcissus listening for hours to a song of joy in the water and believing it is a song of praise. When white lilies fill a room with their huge, pungent scent, I am confused by my thoughts about them, the opposite of violets, which make me pause where two sounds intersect and dissolve, indistinguishable as the tears shed at weddings and funerals, and the opposite of anemones, which are content with a song on the broad margins, a pastorale on the low mountain slopes. All of this is so I can say: the red rose is visible music, and jasmine is a message of longing from nobody to nobody.

The road to where

for Sargon Boulos

It is a long road to where. High ground
and low ground. Day and night on either side
A short winter and a long summer. Palm trees
and cypresses, and sunflowers on either side
Gas stations, cafés and clinics
and traffic police on either side. And a prison
a small one, and a shop for tobacco and tea, and a school
for boys, and cellars for girls, and a sign
displaying the temperature, and a billboard for foreigners: Welcome
to the road to where. High ground
and low ground. And the remains of the dead who saw their death
standing in the road, and greeted it
Death said: 'Where are you going?' They said: 'To where!'
We walk along as if we are alike. As if there/here
are the same. As if the road is the goal
without end, but where are we going, and where
are we from? We are the inhabitants of this
long road to a goal that bears a single name:
Where.

The humour of eternity

Graveyards have the dignity of air, the authority of dust. You say farewell to your friend, Mamduh, and await your turn. The smell of wilting flowers and the rustling of trees transport you far away, to the place that lies beyond matter, to your final address in some part of nothingness. But you are thinking about something simpler: graves are mattresses. They seem like comfortable places to sleep. An occupant of such a grave would not lie staring up at his earthy sky and, like his counterpart in the graveyard near the Place du Trocadéro in Paris, would be part of everyday life, being so close to cafés, museums and the social interplay of the living. Life is within reach of his marble headstone, and the abundance of flowers, trees, birds and people surrounding him makes it unnecessary for him to go out for walks, after he has spent his life savings on procuring the privacy of this permanent address. There are some graves that make nothingness visible, like those out in the desert, far from trees and water. There is no companionship for the sleeper there, who burns in the summer heat and freezes in the winter cold, as if he continues to die forever, where death has no metaphor in sleep. But those who oversee the construction of their graves, furnishing them with their photographs, do not think about the comfort to be had from sleeping in friendly proximity to the living, but only of training history to read. They think also of something more complex, of bribing eternity, failing to understand that eternity does not visit graves and loves to joke.

The indifferent one

He cares about nothing. If they cut off the water
to his house he says: ‘Never mind! Winter
is close.’ And if they stop the electricity for an hour
he yawns: ‘Never mind, the sun is enough’
If they threaten to lower his pay he says
‘Never mind! I’ll give up alcohol
and tobacco for a month.’ And if they take him to prison
he says: ‘Never mind, I’ll be alone with myself for a while
in the company of memories’
And if they return him to his house he says:
‘Never mind! This is my home’

I said to him once, angrily: ‘How will you live tomorrow?’
He said: ‘Tomorrow does not concern me. It’s an idea
that does not seduce me. I am what I am: nothing
will change me, just as I will change
nothing, so don’t keep the sun off me!’
I said to him: ‘I am not Alexander the Great
and I am not Diogenes’
And he said: ‘But indifference is a philosophy
It’s one aspect of hope.’

The picture and the frame

If a picture frame gets broken, as the result of a minor earth tremor, you take the picture to a good picture framer and he makes it a frame that may be better than the original. But if a picture is ugly, as the result of some basic artistic flaw, and its frame remains intact, you will not need it unless you are short of wood for the stove. It is the same thing with an idea: if its frame is broken, you find a stronger, more solid one for it. But if the idea is broken, its sound frame will be no more than a sad memory you preserve like a frustrated shepherd who keeps the bell from one of his rams after it has been killed by wolves.

Snow

The white air thickens, slows down and spreads like combed cotton in space. When it comes into contact with the body of night it lights it up on all sides. Snow. The electricity is cut off and I rely on the light from the snow to find my way to the path, the musical interlude between two walls, and to the room next to the six palm trees that stand like nuns on the valley shoulder. An almost metaphysical joy enters me from everything external, and I thank the wind that has brought the snow from regions accessible only in spirit. If I were different I would try hard to describe the snow. But as I have been snatched away into these white cosmic pastures, I break free from myself and am neither me nor someone else, for both of us are guests on the carpet of glittering white jewels, which are visible and wide open to interpretation. When the electricity is restored, I switch off the light and remain standing at the window and see myself over there – an apparition beyond the snow.

An infectious disease

He said to me, after he had broken the glass:
‘Don’t say that poetry, my friend, is beautiful
or powerful
for there is no powerful or beautiful poetry
There is poetry that strikes you, secretly
with the diseases of writing and schizophrenia, and you rave
and your self leaves you for another, and you say:
“I am this one or that one and I am not me.” You spend time
examining words. And when you find
a pulse for them, they stretch up and whisper in your ear:
“Come close and go away, be a stranger and be one with us.” Milk
flows from the night. You feel you are a child
who will soon be born.’

A bed of lavender

Modest and reserved, sweetly perfumed, like a bed of lavender, you sit confronting my gaze. My fingers knock together, and my cup of coffee falls – my excuse, my trick to make you bring your perfume closer to me so that I can gather it up along with the slivers of cardamom – but it doesn't reach me. Because the scent of lavender does not leave the safety of its bedchamber for someone waiting to enjoy its hidden bounty. With growing impatience I lean forward to catch a hint of fragrance from you, as you chastely try to preserve its virginity, swathed in its thick leaves. I move nearer to you, risking all, casting my fear aside. I stretch out my hands to the bed of lavender, rubbing it, holding it close, smelling it, squeezing it, and you say nothing. As if you really are lavender, whose perfume can be held in the hand.

Most and least

Even if you were not the dazzling presence you are, I would be the absence in you that I am – inside and out. Your presence is translucent, crystalline, I see gardens beyond it and am swept away to high wildernesses, inaccessible even to an imagination that is delighted by the range of metaphor and hindered by the poverty of everyday language. I say what I say to you in language that needs the density of honey and the lightness of a butterfly, in the presence of this power that is capable of raising mere chance to the level of something unique and wonderful. For where does your silence take us, as it bestows upon obscure language the seductiveness of word-play? As if I have not written before, and learnt by heart what I wrote to you. Your presence is translucent, and I do not know if your soul inhabited your body, or your body was clothed in your soul and shone like a pearl in my darkness. Form and substance are confused in my mind, and I see form as substance, and substance as the perfect form. I compete with you to be silent, so that I don't say something which plunges me back into the sort of clumsy improvisation I used before you. No, I'm not a poet waiting to get his poem from the signals you give out. You and I – if we may be united in a single phrase, just as we are together here in one room – are light and airy guests on archetypal clouds, longing to fly to the trees of night, with no thought of a tomorrow that fails to prepare us to live without hope. So I am present and you are absent. I watch as your absence accumulates over my head like a heavy sky. Even if you were not the absence you are, I would be the presence I am. As if you are with me. As if I am in the utmost need of the least thing.

I am jealous of everything around you

I am jealous of my senses. The air is the colour of gardenias, your smell on my shoulders like laughter and triumphal arches. I am jealous of the peaceful daggers lying sheathed before you on the table, waiting for a sign from you to kill me. I am jealous of the vase, which has no need of its yellow roses because you give it the full benefit of your deep red lips, hungry for my hunger. I am jealous of the painting staring greedily at you: look longer at me, so I too can have my fill of lakes and cherry orchards. I am envious of the foliage on the rug, straining upwards to see an anklet descending on it from above, and of the anklet when it rests on your knee, making the marble in the room as hot as my fantasies. I am envious of the bookshop that is out of sorts because it doesn't carry an erotic book in praise of two small ivory hills, bared before it to a frenzy of guitars, then hidden by a wave of sighing silk. I am envious of my fingers catching the dialogue of darkness and light as it overflows from your hands, the movement of a spoon in your teacup, the salts stirred up in a body that yearns for a storm to spark the fire of song: gather me up, all of you, and hold me close so I can envy my memories of you in the future. I envy my tongue, which calls your name with as much care as someone carrying four crystal glasses in one hand. I taste the letters of your name one by one, like lyrical fruits. I do not add water to them, so as to preserve the taste of peaches and the thirst of my senses. I envy my imagination embracing you, silencing you, kissing you, caressing you, holding you tight and letting you go, bringing you near and pushing you away, lifting you up and putting you down, making you submit and submitting to you, and doing all the things I never do.

Lose one of your stars

Is all this you?
Mysterious and lucid
present and absent at once
Your eyes are a pitch black night that lights my way
Your hands are cold and trembling
but they ignite a fire in my body
Your voice is a liquid melody that dissolves me in a glass
You are solid and transparent, rebellious and tame
a virgin, mother of two girls:
my poem
and a poem whose writer was destroyed by lack of imagination!
Is all this you?
Summer in winter, and in autumn the spring of yourself
You grow old and young to the notes of your magic flute
The air grows fresh with new life where you pass
The distant water laughs when you look at the clouds
and the sad stones rejoice when you go by in high heels
Is this, all this, you?
Lose one or two of your stars so I can believe
you are a woman of flesh and blood
and not music crushing me like a hazelnut underfoot
Be a little diminished, and break free from your metaphor
so that I can hold every part of you
except the part I have released into the air.

Private meetings

I locked the door and put the key in my pocket. I closed the windows and drew the curtains. I wiped the dust off the mirror, the table and my spectacles, picked the faded flowers off the plant, selected Chopin's *Nocturnes* and unplugged the phone so I wouldn't be disturbed by my girlfriend asking what I was doing tonight. How could I tell her I had a private meeting with myself? I had the feeling that the night, like the world, was no longer a safe place to be as I waited calmly for my appointment. I poured red wine into two glasses and thought vaguely about what to say to my visitor – myself. I anticipated his particular way of exposing me and pulling off my masks, and his sarcastic question: 'How long is it since we've met?' I would say: 'Not since you had your fill of me and I of you, and you took refuge in my image of you and I in yours of me.' Then he would ask me: 'So why didn't you forget to forget me?' I would say: 'So I don't miss an opportunity to ignore you.' He would say to me: 'I don't understand you.' I would say: 'Nor do I. The world is no longer a safe place. I need you to save me. Why were you late for our meeting?' He would ask: 'What meeting?' I would say: 'This one. Have you forgotten?' But there is no answer and I stare at his glass and it's not there. I drank my wine and felt drunk and said: 'I'm all alone.' I plugged in the phone again and called my girlfriend. 'Come and see me,' I pleaded. She said: 'I can't leave the house, I've got a private meeting with myself.'

She said to him

‘Night is a history of longing, and you are my night’
you said to me, and left me
You left my night to me, and yours, and both so cold
and I will be hurt by winter and memories of you
and you will be hurt by the scent of my lilies in the air
Too bad!
I will love the first passer-by
crying over a woman who threw him out as you did me
We (the stranger and I) will care for our night and light it up
We will furnish our little eternity. We will choose
(the stranger and I) our bed and our feelings with care
Perhaps we will recite together (the stranger and I)
the love poem you dedicated to me
‘Night is a history of longing
and you are my night.’

A sneeze

Frustration follows the spurious kind of happiness that is like a sneeze brought on by the smell of petrol. I was happy I sneezed, but that doesn't help create a memory I can look back on. When I ask: What is happiness? I am philosophizing without a philosophy, not trying to be a mystic searching for happiness in the beyond. I might find it by chance, and I might not, but I am not searching for happiness as much as for an answer to comfort and console me. Whenever I ask myself: Am I happy tonight? I am embarrassed by my naivety and open the window to see what the sky looks like, because the cold also makes me sneeze, and because the stars are words on their way towards me, and so a moment of happiness arrives from outside. Joy is nothing more than a winning lottery ticket, for which we only have to say thank you to chance. Is my life merely non-existence indulging me for a moment? As I write this question the electricity is cut off and I feel cold without sneezing!

In praise of wine

I study the wine in the glass before tasting it. I let it breathe the air it has been deprived of for years. It has been suffocated to preserve its character. It has fermented while it slumbered, and stored summer for me, and the memory of grapes. I leave it to choose its colour, wrongly described as red. It is a mixture of crimson tinged faintly with black, which can only be called wine-coloured, so we can take a break from the charade of describing things. I let it respect its smell, the proud, exalted smell like women of unblemished reputation. If you want to smell it, it doesn't come to you. You have to make sure your hand is clean and free of perfume, then extend it softly and affectionately towards the glass as if approaching a woman's breast. You bring the glass up to your nose with the deliberate action of a bee, and a profound, mysterious smell throws you into disarray: the smell of a colour that takes you into old monasteries. I let it gather its thoughts on its taste until we are both thirsty enough to receive inspiration by mouth. I go neither too fast nor too slowly, for either would break the rhythm of enjoyment. I bring the glass to my lips as shyly as a man begging a first kiss from a woman whose feelings are not clear to him. I take a delicate sip and look upwards, eyes half closed, until the most exquisite feeling of intoxication flows through my veins. My appetite is aroused as befits a wine fit for a king. The wine is raising me to a higher level, not celestial but not earthly either, and convincing me that I have it in me to be a poet, even if it's just this once!

At the top of the cypress trees

She said to him: ‘Are you the one who wrote the poem?’
He said: ‘I don’t know. I dreamt I was alive’
She said: ‘Then what?’
He said: ‘I believed the dream, and flew for joy
to you, to you’
She said: ‘Then what?’
He said: ‘When I spoke your name the valley returned
the echo, and my eyes were bathed in visions’
She said: ‘Then what?’
He said: ‘I dreamt nothing more
I see in the glass clearly. You are you
as I saw you in my dream. And I am I’
She said: ‘And what else?’
He said to her: ‘Life is short and beautiful
Are you the one who wrote my last poem for me?’
She said: ‘No. I am a ghost’
He said: ‘So am I, perhaps ghosts can converse
like souls’
She said: ‘Where are we now?’
He said: ‘At the top of the cypress trees.’

Point of view

What distinguishes the narcissus and the sunflower is their different points of view: the former looks at its reflection in the water and says: ‘There is no I but I’, while the latter looks at the sun and says: ‘I am only what I worship.’

At night the distinction grows narrower, and the interpretation broader!

The mercy bullet

I envy horses: if they break a leg and feel humiliated because they can no longer charge back and forth in the wind, they are cured by a mercy bullet. So if something in me gets broken, physically or spiritually, I would do well to look for a proficient killer, even if he is one of my enemies. I will pay him a fee and the price of the bullet, kiss his hand and his revolver, and if I am able to write, extol him in a poem of rare beauty, for which he can choose the metre and rhyme.

Shyness

Shyly I look at a beggar's bowl. Shyly I listen to an old song on a scratched record.

Shyly I smell the perfume of a rose that is not mine. Shyly I savour the taste of wild mulberries. Shyly I rub one of my limbs. Shyly I use my five senses and obey my sixth. Shyly I live, as if I were the guest of a gypsy who is ready to move on.

Perfection is the same as imperfection

Time has flown, and I have not flown with it
‘Stop,’ I said, ‘I have not finished dinner yet
not taken all my medicine
not written the last line of my will
not paid any debt to life
Life has seen me standing hungry by the fence
and fed me with a fig from its trees
seen me naked under the sky
and clothed me in a cloud of its cotton
seen me sleeping on the pavement
and housed me in a star on its breast’
Life said: ‘Learn about me, you will find me waiting for you!’
I said thank you to life, for it is a gift and a talent
I learned about life with all the hardship I could
and it taught me how to forget it to live it

Death said to me unbidden:
‘Don’t forget me, for I am life’s brother’
I said: ‘Your mother is a vague question of no concern to me’
and death flew from my words to take care of its business
‘Long live life!’ I shouted, when I found it spontaneous
instinctive, playing and laughing without a care in the world. It loves us and
we love it
It is harsh and gentle, a mistress and a slave-girl
and weeps for nobody. For it does not have time
It buries the dead in haste, dances like a courtesan
falls short, then reaches perfection. Perfection is the same as imperfection
and memory forgetfulness made visible

But I played with life as if it was a ball and a game of chance
I never thought of the riddle: What is life?

‘How can I fill it and it fill me?’ I asked when
I saw death was giving me time to ask
and I waited for time to pass. I said: ‘Tomorrow I shall look into the
question
of life.’ But I didn’t find the time
because time double-crossed me and took me by surprise, and has flown.

Prickly pear

The prickly pear that borders the ways in to the villages was a faithful guardian of signs. When we were children, just a few moments ago, these plants showed us where the paths were. So we stayed out late with the jackals and the stars. We also hid the little things we stole – dates, dried figs, school notebooks – in their spiky secret rooms, and when we grew older, without realising how and when that had happened, their yellow flowers enticed us to follow girls on the way to the laughing spring, and we boasted to one another about how many thorns we had stuck in our hands. When the blossom died and the fruit swelled, the prickly pear was incapable of repelling the weapons of the killer army, but it remained a faithful guardian of the signs: there, behind the plants are houses buried alive and kingdoms, kingdoms of memory, and life waiting for a poet who does not like stopping at ruins, unless the poem demands it.

In the empty square

An empty square. Flies, midday heat and a fig tree keeping nobody company. A dog barks in the distance as I approach the empty square. I wonder what lies beyond it, and behind a poem written by a frustrated poet about the terror of the empty square: ‘I and the words I spoke, and the words I did not speak, arrived in an empty square.’ There dryness resounds like a piece of metal, and your footsteps make a similar sound ‘as if you are someone else’, followed by an echo from the dry air ‘as if I am him.’ When the square is empty, thoughts extend to what went on before: to a life that was here, that came from the narrow alleys to take the sun or have a breath of air or prove what was possible. I did not ask: ‘Where have I come from?’ but: ‘Why have I come to the empty square?’ I was afraid, and tried to retreat into one of the narrow alleyways, but they all changed into snakes. I closed my eyes, rubbed them and opened them again to see my nightmare in front of me. It was not a nightmare. It was a nightmarish reality. But the empty square grew bigger and the fig tree higher, the noonday heat blazed brighter and the flies multiplied. The barking dogs kept me company in the distance, there was life over there. For some vague reason I remembered the words I had not spoken, remembered them and forgot them.

A short holiday

I believed I'd died on Saturday
I said: 'I must leave something in a will'
but could find nothing
and I said: 'I must call a friend
to tell him I've died'
but could find no one
and I said: 'I must go to my grave
to fill it', and couldn't find the way
and my grave remained empty of me
and I said: 'I have a duty to do my duty:
to write the last line on the shadows'
and water ran from them over the letters
I said: 'I must accomplish some deed
here and now'
but found no action suitable for a dead man

So I shouted: 'This death has no meaning
It's a joke, it's anarchy in the senses
and I won't believe that I have died completely
Perhaps I am somewhere in between
or perhaps I am a retired dead man
spending a short holiday in life!'

Fame

Fame is the humiliation of a person deprived of secrets. It makes him vary the speed of his walk to reassure the onlookers, as they demand, that the ground is solid beneath his feet. The top of the head must not be held too high, so the sky can remain a general reference point. The frame must be slightly bowed for greeting passers-by, and any birds who may be hovering close above. The left hand, wearing a watch, gold or diamond according to who you believe, is thrust into the pocket of trousers of a neutral shade of grey, while the right hand regulates its movement by clutching a book or newspaper. The overcoat is navy blue, because any other colour would stir up rumours. Fame, as it is a person being stripped naked, requires some protection under the clothes from hidden cameras full of pictures ready to be taken. Fame tempts slander to aspire to the level of crime by committing acts of spiritual assassination that go unpunished by law. Fame is punishment where no wrong has been committed, imposing a mask of contentment on the person so he smiles on demand, dictating that he stand at length with strangers even if he resents it, obliging him to utter stock phrases devoid of sense or meaning. Fame is the enemy of instinct and spontaneity, the difference between what is said and what ought to be said, and the transformation of one person into two, having a conversation in a room with closed windows: which one of us deceived the other, me or you? Fame is the scourge of the impulsive, and a many-windowed prison, well-lit and under tight surveillance.

If I were a hunter

If I were a hunter
I would give the gazelle a chance
and a second
and a third
and a tenth
to fall asleep
and I would be satisfied with my share of her:
peace of mind as she slumbers
I am able but I abstain
I am pure
like the water in the spring near her covert

If I were a hunter
I would be a brother to the gazelle:
‘Don’t be afraid of the gun
my poor little sister’
And we would listen, safe and sound, to
the howling of wolves in distant fields.

Nightmare

When I wake up at dawn my day is sick. Nightmares do not come back to me from the night, but from a depraved dawn, as if a metaphysical sorrow is dragging me into a dark blue forest: here there are masked gunmen and a camera. They tie me to the trunk of a grieving Iraqi palm tree, next to another palm where an Arab horse is tethered. They ask me for my full name and I give my father's and grandfather's names wrongly because of this pressure at dawn. I cannot see their sarcasm under their masks, but I hear them whispering to one another: 'We won't execute him now, all at once, as we're still in the first chapter of the novel. We'll kill him gradually, in instalments, and make do with executing the horse now.' As they loosen my bonds, they stuff a videotape in my pocket and say: 'This is a torture training video', then take me back home. I don't rejoice that I am alive as I watch the tape. I am sad because the horse is looking at me with a mixture of pity and reproach.

Iraq’s night is long

for Sa’di Yusuf

Iraq, Iraq is blood that the sun does not dry
and the sun is God’s widow over Iraq. The murdered Iraqi
says to the people standing on the bridge: ‘Good morning
to you, for I am still alive.’ They say: ‘You are still
a dead man looking for his grave where the doves cry’

Iraq, Iraq, Iraq’s night is long
Dawn only breaks for the dead to pray half a prayer
and they never complete a salutation to anyone, for the Mongols
are coming from the gate of the Caliph’s palace on the bend of the river
and the river runs south, south, and carries our dead
sleepless to the palm trees’ kin

Iraq, Iraq is open graveyards like schools
Open to all, from the Armenian to the Turcoman
and Arab. We are equal in the study of the science
of the Last Day. There should be a poet asking:
‘Baghdad, how many times will you betray the legends? How many times
construct statues for the future? How many times
demand marriage with the impossible?’

Iraq, Iraq, here the prophets stand
powerless to pronounce the name of heaven. For who
is killing who now in Iraq? Victims are fragments
on roads and in words. Their names are tufts
of letters disfigured like their bodies. Here
the prophets stand together powerless to pronounce the name
of heaven, and the fallen

Iraq, Iraq, who are you when suicide is all around?
I am not I in Iraq and you are not you, and what
is he except another? The deity has abandoned the helpless
So who are we? Who are we? No more than an item
in this poem: Iraq's night is very long!

In Cordoba

Cordoba's wooden doors do not invite me in to give a greeting from Damascus to a fountain and a jasmine bush. I walk in the narrow alleys on a gentle, sunny spring day. I tread lightly as if I am a guest of myself and my memories, not an archaeological fragment passed around by tourists. I do not tap on the shoulder of my past with melancholy joy, as expected of me by a poem I've postponed writing, and I am not afraid of nostalgia since I shut my suitcase on it, but I fear the future running ahead of me at an automated pace. Whenever I intrude on it, it reproaches me, saying: 'Explore the present.' But there are many poets in Cordoba, foreigners and Andalusians, talking about the past of the Arabs and the future of poetry. In a modest park with few trees I see a sculpture of the hands of Ibn Zaydun and Wallada, and ask one of my favourite poets, Derek Walcott, if he knows anything about Arab poetry. With no apology, he says: 'No, nothing at all.' All the same, we stayed together for three days, continuously making fun of poetry and poets, who he described as metaphor thieves. 'How many metaphors have you stolen?' he asked me, and I was unable to answer. We competed with one another flirting with the Cordoban women. 'If you liked a woman, would you approach her?' he asked me. 'The more beautiful she is, the more daring I am,' I said. 'What about you?' 'If I like a woman, she comes to me,' he said. 'Because you are a king and a son of a . . . I don't know what,' I said. His third wife was laughing. In Cordoba I stood before a wooden front door and searched in my pocket for the keys to my old house, as Nizar Qabbani once did. I shed no tears, because the new wound covers the scar of the old. But Derek Walcott surprised me with a hurtful question: 'Who does Jerusalem belong to? You or them?'

In Madrid

Sun and light rain, an uncertain spring. The trees in the garden of the student residence are high and ancient. The paths are covered in gravel, which makes walking on them more like a comic attempt to practise flamenco, and an unsteady light filters through the shadows. From this hilltop we look down on Madrid, big and low like a green pool. We sit on a wooden bench – the Canadian-American poet Mark Strand and I – to have our photos taken with the students and sign Spanish translations of our books, competing to hide the unexpected joy a poet feels when he comes face to face with an anonymous reader and realises that his poetry, written in a closed room, has made the journey to this garden. An elegant woman approaches me. She says: 'I'm Lorca's granddaughter.' I embrace her, trying to catch a whiff of him. 'What do you remember of him?' I ask. She was born after his execution, she replies. Do you know how much we love him? Everyone says that, and I feel proud. He's an icon. The director of the student residence reminds me that this place is a Madrid landmark. You miss something if you don't do a poetry reading here. Lorca, Alberti, Jimenez and Salvador Dali all lived here. At the end of our joint session I am obliged to put a question to Mark Strand. I ask him: What are the obvious dividing lines between poetry and prose? He hesitates, as true poets do when faced with a hard definition. Then he says – and he writes prose poetry: 'The rhythm, the rhythm. Poetry is defined by its rhythm.' When we go out into the garden to walk on the gravel paths we don't talk much, so as not to disturb the rhythm of night above the high trees. For some reason I remember Nietzsche's perceptive remark: 'Wisdom is meaning deprived of song.'

High is the mountain

He walks on clouds in his dreams, and sees
the unseen. He thinks the clouds are dry land
High is the mountain

higher and further. Nothing reminds him
of nowhere, so he walks with his misgivings
Walks, and does not arrive

as if he is he, or one of the attributes of ‘I’
that the two opposites, hope and despair
have divided between themselves

The mist was thick in his poem
He was rising up from my dream, so I said to him:
‘High is the mountain.’

I don’t notice

I see what I see
without noticing
and since I don’t see what I see
I get in a mess
and live
as if I am me
or somebody else
and don’t notice!

That word

He liked a word
He opened the dictionary
He couldn't find it
or an imprecise meaning for it
but it haunted him at night
musical, harmonious
with a mysterious nature

He said: 'It needs a poet
and some metaphor so that it turns green and red
on the surface of dark nights'

What is it?
He found the meaning
and the word was lost to him.

Echo

In the echo is a well
In the well is an echo
and the space
seems grey, neutral
as if war has not happened
or happened yesterday
and might come tomorrow

In the echo is a well
In the well is an echo
and I search the space between them
for the source of the sound
in vain.

The second olive tree

The olive tree does not cry or laugh. Modest mistress of the hillsides, she covers her trunk with her shadow and does not divest herself of her leaves in the face of a storm. She stands as if sitting, and sits as if standing. She lives as sister to a friendly eternity and neighbour to time that entrusts her to store luminous oil and forget the names of invaders, with the exception of the Romans, who were her contemporaries and borrowed some of her branches to plait garlands. They did not treat her like a prisoner of war, but rather a respected grandmother whose superior dignity was mightier than the sword. In her restrained silvery greenness is a colour too shy to declare itself openly, a glance towards something beyond description, for she is neither green nor silver. She is the colour of peace, if peace needs a colour to distinguish it. Nobody says to her: 'How beautiful you are!' but they do say: 'How venerable and sublime you are!' It is she who trains soldiers to lay down their weapons, and drills them in homesickness and humility: 'Return to your homes, and use my oil to light your lamps.' But these soldiers, these new soldiers, surround her with bulldozers and uproot her. They crush our grandmother, so that now her branches are in the earth and her roots in the air. She did not weep or shout, but one of her grandsons, who witnessed the execution, threw a stone at a soldier and was martyred alongside her. When the soldiers left triumphantly, we buried him there, in the deep hole, our grandmother's cradle. For some reason we were convinced that after a while he would become an olive tree, spiky and – green!

Willow tree

A willow tree where two paths intersect: have
the northerners come? Or the southerners gone?
No war there, and no peace, and the sky
is clean and light above the place
He said to me, tucking under his arm the notebook in which he wrote his poems:
‘This, stranger, is my identity’

Meddling in the alphabet. Every letter is a hill
and a garden. He, not I, when it comes to letters
is his own master. He chooses his imaginary world
away from nature. Perhaps I have corrected
mistakes on the map. Perhaps I have alleviated the ravages
of life’s slow poison on my brothers.
And he says to me: ‘I am present in all things
absent from all things, between yesterday
and my present is a willow tree
a willow tree where two times intersect’
I say: ‘So who are you?’
He says to me, tucking his notebook under his arm
entangled in his poetic way of talking:
‘This is all that’s left of the wreckage of my identity.’

Right of return to paradise

If God has punished Adam by driving him out of eternal life into time, then the earth is exile and history a tragedy. It began with a family quarrel between Cain and Abel, then developed into civil wars, regional wars and global wars, which are continuing until history's descendants have wiped out history. So what's next? What comes after history? It seems that the right of return to paradise is encompassed by nothingness and divine mysteries. The only smooth road is the road to the abyss, until further notice . . . until the issuing of a divine pardon.

If it were not for sin

It is not as Adam thought!

If it were not for sin
if it were not for the descent to earth
the discovery of misery
and the temptation of Eve
if it were not for the longing for a lost paradise
there would be no poetry
nor memory
and eternity would be no consolation.

Italian autumn

A song which needs Italian words. What an autumn . . . what an autumn. The sky is not blue or white or grey, because the colours are points of view agreeing and disagreeing. The small clouds are towels drying the drizzle off the mountain tops, and the mountains grow higher as the sky comes to meet them. The trees are females, who have just come out of a bath of clouds to dress in birds that are not emigrating today, because autumn does not signal a faded, sad time, but is a festive fashion show put on to derive colour from no colour. It excites a longing for what is beyond description and precedes the frenzied rattle of amber in lovers' beds. Autumn is the smooth whiteness of marble when the senses are awakened to the call of honeyed juices. I am here on the outskirts of L'Aquila in Italy, sitting on a wide glass-fronted balcony that looks on to a scene of welcome calm: in the valley eternity gives a passing nod to its visitors, who are climbing to the lower slopes of mountains where history has carved out fortresses as a protection against barbarians, then descended to the valley, wrinkled, head bowed. Nothing frightens the deer and rabbits, and I wish for nothing as I follow the leaves descending gradually from a tree to the ground, like a woman slowly undressing in her lover's imagination. Here I am a leaf, being carried by the breeze to a wintry sleep from which I will awake in blossom. Here, beside this genial eternity that is indifferent to the history of the mountain forts, a visitor like me can discover one of the meanings of clouds and say: 'Thanks be to lightness!'

Two travellers to a river

I see love five metres away, sitting in the departure lounge full of passengers travelling to permanent addresses. The airport is crowded. The French boy and the Japanese girl are detached from the crowd. Wrapped up, it appears to me, in a single blue cloud. They doze fitfully and pay no attention to their surroundings. He puts his head on her shoulder and she looks at him with a glance as soft as silk, which she is careful not to make too direct, as if she doesn't want him to see her seeing him, as if they are at the beginning of love and she is shy of him knowing how much she is going to love him. Then the shyness switches from her to him. He looks at her when she puts her head on his shoulder with the look of someone who is afraid of breaking a fragile crystal ornament, and when their eyes meet, passionately and transparently, the girl gets up to buy a bottle of water. The girl feeds the water to the boy as if she were suckling him, and he feeds it to her as if he were kissing her. I close the novel I was reading on the journey to watch this image of love from a distance. I tremble, invigorated by an indefinable perfume drifting over me from a Japanese girl and a French boy as delicate together as male and female gazelles. He says nothing to her, and she says nothing to him. They are content with interludes of silence, like in Japanese music. Perhaps they are not old enough to talk about how they are no longer two separate beings. Had she said something to him, it would have been: 'The river we are going to cross at the end of this journey passes close to our home.' And had he said something to her, it would have been: 'The river we are going to cross at the end of this journey is our home!'

A killer and innocent

It is love, like a wave
Recurrence of our bliss, old, new
quick, slow
innocent as a gazelle racing a bicycle
and obscene, like a rooster
Reckless like someone in need
moody and vicious
calm as imagination arranging its phrases
Dark, gloomy, and bursting into light
Empty and full of its contradictions

It is animal/angel
with the power of a thousand horses, and the lightness of a ghost
equivocal, petulant, peaceable
Whenever it flees, it returns
It treats us well, and badly
it takes us by surprise when we forget our emotions
and arrives without warning
It's an anarchist/an egoist/
master/one and only/multiple
We believe sometimes, and sometimes have no faith
but it is indifferent to us
When it hunts us down one by one
then slays us with a cool hand

It is a killer, and innocent.

As if she is a song

As if I had a dream: I saw you fair, dark
golden brown, your own definition of colour
You sit on my knee, as if you are you. As if I
am I. And we have the night ahead of us
to stroll in lilac-scented gardens. Everything there
is here. It is all ours. You are mine, I am yours
and the shadow, your shadow, laughs like an orange. The dream
did its job and, like a postman, hurried on
to someone else. So we have to be
worthy, this evening, of ourselves, and of a river
that runs along beside us, and that we flow into as it flows into us.

My poet/my other

The poem is born at night from the water's womb
It weeps, crawls, walks, and runs in the dream
blue white green. Then it grows up and makes its escape
at dawn
This happens while the poet is asleep, unaware of his poem
and his surroundings. He does not see it taking its chance and flying off
to someone else
In the morning he says: 'It's as if I dreamt of it,
of the poem. Where is it now?'
He drinks his coffee distractedly, envious of someone else
then in the end he says: 'Good health to him, my poet/my other!'

A clear sky and a green garden

A clear sky is a thought without an idea, like a garden that is completely green. A poem whose only fault is its excessive clarity. The sky lacks even a passing cloud to arouse the imagination from the stupor of blue, and the green garden lacks a different colour, red or yellow or lilac, and jackals, to create some inner confusion. For the ready-made is the enemy of initiative. A poem needs some kind of cunning flaw so that we believe the poet when he lies and writes about the spiritual confusion provoked by a clear sky and a green garden. For why do we need poetry if the poet says the sky is clear and the garden is green?

A single word

The whisper of a word in the unseen is the music of meaning made new in a poem whose reader thinks, because it is so private, that he wrote it.

One word only, shining like a diamond or a firefly in the night of many species, is what makes prose into poetry.

An ordinary word that one person says casually to another, at the corner of the street or in the shops, is what makes a poem possible.

A sentence of prose, without metre or rhythm, if the poet accommodates it skilfully in the right context, helps him determine the rhythm, and lights the way to meaning through the murkiness of words.

The essence of the poem

The thing missing from the poem – and I don't know what it is – is its glowing secret, what I call the essence of the poem.

.

When the poem is clear in the poet's mind before he writes it, from the first line to the last, he becomes a postman, and the imagination a bicycle!

.

The road to meaning, however long and branching, is the poet's journey. When the shadows lead him astray, he finds his way back.

.

What is meaning? I don't know, but I may know what its opposite is: thinking that nothingness is easy to bear.

.

Suffering is not a talent. It is a test of talent, and it either defeats talent or is defeated by it.

.

All beautiful poetry is an act of resistance.

.

A living heritage is what is written today, and tomorrow.

.

A great poet is one who makes me small when I write, and great when I read.

.

I walk among the verses of Homer, al-Mutanabbi and Shakespeare, and stumble like a trainee waiter at a royal feast.

.

A cloud in a poet's imagination is an idea.

.

Poetry – what is it? It is the words we say when we hear it or read it. This is poetry! We don’t need any proof.

Satire

The only proper way to eulogise a sultan's wife is in a poem of two hemistichs throughout: the first one devoted to her breasts and the second to her bottom.

The sultan's elegy is a eulogy delayed for reasons of protocol: the gatekeeper would not allow the poet to enter the palace and carry out his job, but he allowed him to visit the grave.

I do not hate a poet who hates me, but apologise for the pain I have caused him.

On oratory and orators

Oratory, or most oratory these days, is the art of trivialising the skill. A drum confiding with another drum in a public square and filling the echoing space, regardless of its size, with empty noise, an emptiness which the orator seizes on to fill with more insignificance. The voice, not the words, is master, raised high on an echo which applauding hands protect from the danger of stumbling upon the truth. Oratory is not a question of what the orator-clown wants to say, since the voice precedes the absent content, and the speech itself is the object of the exercise, fired by an instinctive desire to destroy the opponent, the thrusts of a gutless picador to delight sadistic spectators at a bullfight. Oratory is the execution of meaning in a public square. The subject comes after the voice has a short break for a mouthful of water, but the deferred predicate is left to a swaggering improvisation, backed up by a Quranic verse taken out of context, or a line of poetry composed in praise of an Umayyad prince, whom the orator thinks was an Abbasid, which earns a round of applause. Applause is what he is aiming for, and in the course of it he retrieves the next lot of non-ideas from the scene before him, and smiles as if rewarding his audience for their faith in their own intelligence, acquired from his excessive intelligence, and makes a silly joke, and they laugh and he laughs. Oratory is the act of inciting discontent against discontent, employing the rhetoric of complaint about the risks posed to the nation by discontent. The orator removes his coat to indicate to the audience the location of his active conscience, puts his hand in his trouser pocket searching for an idea and moves to the right and the left because he is uncertain where the people's affiliations lie. So whether they are on the right or the left, they will trust him. Then he returns to the middle ground and continues to repeat the phrase: Trust me! Oratory is supremely capable of raising lies to the level of rapturous music. In oratory, truthfulness is a slip of the tongue.

Half and half

You live by halves
You are not you, or
someone else
Where is ‘I’ in the darkness of resemblance?

As if I am a ghost
walking towards a ghost
when all I am is a person who has walked past the ghost

I emerged from my first image
to catch up with the ghost
and it shouted as it disappeared:
‘Watch out, my other self!’

I think

I think
and there is no crime in what I think
and no delusion
that I
with a thread of silk can cut through iron
that I
with a thread of wool
can build tents in remote places
and escape from them
and from me
because I . . . as if I!

The second line

The first line is a gift to talent from the invisible world. But the second line might be poetry or it might be Frost's disappointment. The second line is the battle of the known and the unknown, when the roads are empty of signs and the possible is full of contradictions, for everything possible is possible, and the second line is the uncertainty of the creature imitating the creator. Does a word guide its speaker or the speaker the word? The second line is not a gift, rather it is constructed by a skilful taming of the unseen, for you see and do not see because the light is so mixed up with the darkness. You are the one to whom inspiration has given the starting signal, and then it abandons you to carry on alone without a compass. You are like someone setting off into a forest without knowing what awaits you: an ambush, a shot, a bolt of lightning, or a woman asking you the time. You say to her: 'Time has stopped, so you may pass by' (Pessoa). The possible is a forest, so which tree trunk will you rest your imagination on and which wild beast will you escape from? If you find your way to the second line in the labyrinth of the possible, then you will know the easy route to an appointment with the impossible.

Higher and further

Moist is the sea air
sweet the song of a bird at the window

This was all that remained of the words of the dream
when I woke up at dawn, I said:
‘Perhaps my innocent unconscious favours the rhythm
when it says to me:
“Moist is the sea air
sweet the song of a bird at the window”’

But my consciousness was guiding the meaning towards the rhythm
(or vice versa)
when it said to me:
‘It’s hard to climb the hill, so climb
higher and further.’

The canary

Close to what will be
we listened to the canary's words
to me and you:
'Singing in a cage is possible
and so is happiness'

The canary when it sings
brings closer what will be
Tomorrow you will look at today-yesterday
You will say: 'It was beautiful
and did not last long'
and you will be neither happy nor sad

Tomorrow, we will remember that we left the canary
in a cage, alone
not singing to us
but to passing snipers.

On a boat on the Nile

A boat on the Nile. Tuesday. Coffee, tea, cigarette smoke, talk about the world that is all we know, although thoughts of what lies beyond it, like the birds hovering over the eternal river, privately disturb each one of those gathered around Naguib Mahfouz. Meanwhile, he is listening with a selective ear, as the words take their time to reach him, not wanting his disciples to over-interpret his modest pronouncements. He knows enough about being eulogised to counter foolish acclaim with reticence, and doesn't want anyone gazing at idols or graven images. But we make a pilgrimage to him, not to get to know him, as we have already immersed ourselves in his novels and identified with his characters, but to salute him for what he has written, and salute ourselves as we sit in the presence of a living legend, straight out of a Pharaonic manuscript. I have seen women coming from the most far-flung parts of the Arabic-speaking world to kiss his hand, and he is embarrassed and doesn't know why, as if he is himself and not himself at the same time. Then he laughs loudly and asks for a cigarette, as it is time for the aura of sanctity, regarded with scepticism by a shrewd man like him, to be dispersed in a cloud of smoke, and it is for other people to interpret his work. He lived to write, and after he was stabbed in the neck he gave up narrating details with ant-like persistence and chose instead to distil honey like a bee. From the day of the attack, we were coming to him to say goodbye, as his life was no longer what it had been and death was tired of waiting, except we tried not to let him know this as we surrounded him on a boat on the Nile on Tuesdays. But now the Tuesday meetings are over.

The lonely man’s addiction

I listen to Umm Kulthum every night, since the time when Thursday was the highlight of the week, a rare jewel, and the other days a necklace of incomparable beauty. She is an addiction for the solitary, and her voice arouses faraway places from their lethargy like the call of a wild horse in the open country. When we listen to her together we get to our feet in raptures, and the same when we’re alone, until the queen signals to us to be seated, so we sit down on a metre of air. She divides us up phrase by phrase with a magic string which has no need of oud or violin, for her throat contains a band, a whole orchestra, and a divine mystery. She is heaven visiting us outside prayer times, and we pray for her special style of revelation. She is earth, light as a butterfly, present or absent in a drop of light or the wave of a lover’s hand. Her sigh, shimmering like a broken diamond, can lead an army into battle, and her cry bring us back from perdition unscathed. Her whisper can slow down the night, which only speeds up again when she opens the gates of dawn. This is why she keeps her eyes open while she sings, to make sure the night cannot doze. She is intoxicating wine that never runs out. The one and only, happy in her kingdom of night, she banishes our misery with song, makes us fall in love with a granddaughter of the Pharaohs, and brings us close to the eternity of the moment that she carves out on a temple wall, where dust yields to something palpable. In our night she belongs to everybody and nobody. Her handkerchief, keeping the rhythm, is banner to a legion of lovers competing for the love of a person they don’t know, but her heart is none of our concern, because it is as hard and closed as a dried-up walnut.

In Rabat

In the city of Rabat, high above the Atlantic waves, the poet walks along the street searching for a chance meaning and the meaning of chance. He is quite familiar with palm trees, so he asks passers-by for the names of the other trees, whose branches bear blossoms like live coals, but doesn't receive a single answer, as if trees were a point of view or a metaphor. But the passers-by ask him about the meaning of a metaphor in some poem he has forgotten writing, and he cannot come up with a single answer, as if the metaphor is a tree whose name he doesn't know. From one greeting to another the poet walks down the street, as if walking in an invisible poem, which opens with an old Moroccan bending down to pick up a crust of bread, knocking the dust off it, kissing it and stowing it away in a hole in the wall for the birds to eat. I have my own special place in Rabat: the Muhammad V Theatre. There my soul is filled to overflowing. Although I do not know much about myself, I know enough to feel at one with this temple, which is receptive to unpredictable flashes of inspiration. It is as if, when I am there, I am not reading or reciting, but improvising on what the silence, the faint light and the eloquent eyes dictate to me, forming it into phrases and returning it to hands that take hold of it as if it were transparent, created from air. As if I am reading someone else's poetry, and delighting in it for that reason, and am not me, except insofar as the poetry is the poet. But I steal a glance at a girl laughing and crying in the far corner of the poem, and cry and laugh with her, conspiring with her to open the theatre doors to interpretation. Moroccans can rightly say: 'We are the ones who inspired him.'

Description

She passed like an event
with a hawk aloft on each shoulder
and her chest rising and falling like the act of love
bearing twins nudging and jostling one another on the marble
her knees emitting lightning flashes visible to the blind
and her legs two pillars of a marble temple
wondrous in the wind
And the feet two wicked little birds, aerial-terrestial
and the hair streaming out behind her
a military banner conquering the desert
The eyes not regarding her victims
so nobody saw her eyes and nobody could tell the story
of violets she had mown down
that woman-jinn-fate
who passed like an event
But I escaped, and no harm came to me
save the weakness of the description in this poem.

In Skogås

Skogås is on the outskirts of Stockholm, a forest of birches, pines, poplars, cherries and cypresses. Salim Barakat, in the isolation chosen for him by the artful winds of fate, has not emerged from it since he became part of the scene, surrounded by the birds of the north: magpies, crows, nutcrackers, woodpeckers, jays, blue tits, blackbirds, pheasants and waxwings. He has made friends with them, and knows them by their plumage, beaks, tails and migratory habits, and he has bestowed Kurdish adjectives upon them, derived from an anxiety, not to disrupt his isolation, but to make it more comfortable living far from home, away from writers jealous of the exile's eloquence, and close to the squirrels, rabbits, deer and foxes that greet him through the window, and run away and play while he conducts his linguistic exercises. He wakes up to the sound of birds quarrelling at the windows of his house of brick and timber, and drags his little cart to the meat market – responding to its call to his senses. There he makes his choice, unashamedly eager for the training of the wild in the art of cooking. To kindle the desire between the eater and the eaten, he selects hot, pungent spices, special mushrooms to enhance the word play, and Shiraz wine to stimulate the poet's inclination to rejoice and sing in the autumn of exile. He drags his little cart through the forest, accompanied by the birds of the north who recognise him from his rain and sweat-soaked vest. Nobody but a Kurd like him would brave the Baltic climate. If he's having ideas now, they are just about cooking – his day's visible poem. Cooking is the talent of knowing what goes with what, of using poetic imagination to achieve smell and taste, and of creating sensuous meaning out of primitive form. Cooking is the poetry of the senses when they are combined in the hand, an edible poem which cannot tolerate mistakes in the balance of the ingredients. And Salim Barakat cannot tolerate praise since he became prone to tears.

The exile finds his way

The exile looks around to see which way to go
and words-memories escape him
In front is not in front of him
behind is not behind
On the right a lit-up sign
on the left another
He asks himself:
Where does life begin?
I need a narcissus
so I can be master of my own image!
And he says: ‘The free man is he who chooses his exile
for some reason or other’
I am free so
I’ll walk on, then the way will become clear.

Boulevard St Germain

George Steiner says to me: ‘The poet should be a guest.’
I say: ‘And a host!’

.

The faded leaves falling from the trees are words in search of a skilful poet to put them back on the branches.

.

When there is rhythm concealed in an image it becomes the musical accompaniment to an idea.

.

As I sit with Peter Brook, the birds of Aristophanes and Farid al-Din al-Attar fly above us on a common journey to the limits of meaning.

.

Exile? The visitor longs for it, because it is like being a bird flying happily around with nobody asking it: ‘What’s your name? What do you want?’

.

On the bus, I study the pavement and see myself sitting at the bus stop waiting for the bus.

.

Pretending to be neutral, in a poem or a novel, is the only forgivable crime against morality.

.

Interrupting the rhythm from time to time is necessary for the rhythm.

.

I leave the other side of my life where it wants to stay, and follow the remainder of my life in search of the other side of it.

.

My feeling leaps out of me carrying an umbrella and walks along in the rain. My feeling is an external activity like the rain.

.

The autumn winds sweep the street and teach me the skill of deleting. Deleting is writing.

Things would be different

‘No. Things would not be different as
we used to think if we had waited another hour’
he says to her, and leaves

‘Perhaps if a bird had alighted on my shoulder
things would be different’
she says to him, and leaves

They leave together. And separate at the metro station
like two halves of a peach, and say goodbye to summer

A guitarist passes between them, and he laughs
when he cries. And he cries as he laughs saying:
‘No. Things might have been different if they had listened
to the guitar at the right time’
I said: ‘No! Things might have been
different if they had turned to look at their shadows embracing
and sweating and falling on the pavement
like autumn leaves.’

A life beginning

At a bread shop, on the corner of a narrow Paris street, I sip my first coffee. The smell of bread mixes with the smell of coffee in the mornings, awakening in me the desire for a fresh life, a life just beginning, and a spontaneous peace with small things, and with pigeons who prefer strutting around among cars and passers-by to flying. I don't see anyone else sitting there with only his journals for company, but I feel I am sharing in the elderly ladies' enthusiasm for the detailed information they are relating about other people's lives, and the politely neutral responses of the pretty shop assistants and waitresses when male customers older than me flirt with them. I linger over my coffee to preserve an acquired sense of companionship with my surroundings, for a stranger has no alternative but to construct some kind of intimacy with some random place, and I have chosen this corner of the bread shop to form a daily routine, as if I have an appointment with hardworking memories that rely on themselves to grow and evolve. I abandon myself to thoughts about the history of bread: how was the first grain of wheat discovered in a green ear braided like a pigtail? And how did someone observe it ripening and turning golden? And how did it occur to him to grind it, knead it and bake it until he arrived at this miracle? I see fields far away in time and place and wonder how long this act of creation took. The smell of fresh bread rises into the air and I look at my watch, then come back from thousands of years away to a life just beginning.

The hand of the statue

The hand of the statue, a statue of a general or an artist, is held out, not to greet the sun and rain, or old soldiers and new admirers, but like the hand of a noble beggar asking for donations from passers-by, not to help him walk again, but to cover the costs of eternity. The best this granite hand receives is a bunch of roses bought by a man for a woman who has left him waiting alone by the statue.

In Beirut

Beirut. Sun and rain. Sea blue/green and all the colours in between. But Beirut is not herself this time. She looks at her reflection in the mirror and asks: ‘Why do you want to look like someone else, my beautiful?’ She deposits her beauty on a wave of anxiety and hides her makeup in a drawer, does her hair hurriedly and waits, not knowing what for, like a rose on the public highway. But the atmosphere is seething with the secrets of the clouds approaching from both directions, the desert and the sea, and imagination has no control over the anarchy of the unexpected. She puts her imagination to one side, and surrenders herself to a song that praises meaninglessness without aspiring to the glory of the absurd. Beirut is deprived of the chance to forget her wounds or remember her tomorrow, which has been abandoned to the throw of a dice in a game of backgammon played without rules, like the experimentation of postmodernist poets in her empty cafés. Nobody wins, everyone’s a loser, even if my friend Unsi al-Hajj says: ‘The winner loses and the loser wins.’ Sorrowing Beirut anaesthetises her sadness with an old song about old times: countryside and cedar trees and innocence and a duel between two lovers competing for the same girl. The sorrow sleeps for a few hours, but not the fear. Beirut is frightened for herself and of herself, and of what familiar things the storm is preparing for her in the guise of the unfamiliar.

The return of June

Forty Junes: a tank on the road to
the house. A military control tower to watch the birds
doves hovering in a half circle. A barren palm tree
Anger explodes and brother kills brother, and flees
from his mother. A slogan lights up the streets: We
love life and hate its enemies. A narrow street
where no girls walk. A demonstration by school students
against the maps. ‘There is no God coming down from
his throne.’ A passer-by says mockingly to me: ‘I have no heroes
since June arrived so casually
I swear to God we are on our own. What time is it
now?’ ‘My watch has gone wrong,’ I say
He says: ‘And mine is always wrong.’ Lorries pass
transporting goods with Hebrew names
crates of water. Fruit. Wheat and wine. He says:
‘It’s as if we’ve forgotten our springs, our vines, our names,
and a mask is our identity: in order not to be
clearly seen we see those hidden here all too clearly’
Forty Junes here. The land shrinks and its inhabitants
multiply, surplus to the need of grass for the poor
and of the Ashkenazi for Arab labour
But they hold out, even if reluctantly, and do not move
to Canada. This is our land, and the sky is real
not a metaphor, and high as our hopes. He says to me:
‘Is June a memory?’ and I say: ‘It is a wound
bleeding acutely still, even though its victim says: “I have
forgotten the pain.”’

If only people envied us

That hurrying woman, crowned with a wool blanket and a pitcher of water, dragging a boy in her right hand and his sister in her left, followed by a herd of frightened goats, that woman fleeing from a cramped war zone to a non-existent refuge – I have known her for sixty years. She is my mother who left me behind at a crossroads with a basket of dry bread, a candle, and a box of matches ruined by the damp.

The woman I'm seeing now in the same image on a colour TV screen, I have known well for forty years. She is my sister, following in the footsteps of our mother journeying in the wilderness: fleeing from a cramped war zone to a non-existent refuge.

The woman I will see tomorrow in the same setting, I also know. She is my daughter whom I left in the middle of the poems so that she could learn to walk, then fly, beyond this setting, and perhaps earn the admiration of the viewers and disappoint the snipers. For a clever friend said to me: 'It's time for us to move on, if we can, from a subject that makes people pity us to one that makes them envy us.'

From now on you are somebody else

Did we have to fall from a great height, and see our own blood on our hands, to realise that we are not angels, as we used to believe?

.

Did we have to expose ourselves in public so our reality could lose its virginity?

.

How we lied when we said: ‘We are an exception!’

.

Believing yourself is worse than lying to someone else.

.

To be kind to those who hate us and cruel to those who love us is the baseness of the arrogant, and the self-importance of the dishonourable.

.

Oh past! Don’t change us as we move away from you.

.

Oh future! Don’t ask us who we are and what we want from you, for we don’t know either.

.

Oh present! Be a little patient with us, for we are only passers-by with heavy shadows.

.

Identity is what we bequeath, not what we inherit, what we invent, not what we remember. Identity is the distorted image in the mirror that we must break the minute we grow fond of it.

.

He put on a mask and felt bold and brave, and he killed his mother because it was her fault he was easy prey, and because a female soldier stopped him

and exposed her breasts to him, saying: ‘Has your mother got ones like these, you son of a whore?’

.

If Muhammad were not the Seal of the Prophets then every gang would have a prophet, and all the companions of the prophet would have militias.

.

We like remembering June on its fortieth anniversary. If we don’t find somebody to defeat us again we’ll defeat ourselves with our own hands so that we don’t forget.

.

However much you look into my eyes you won’t find my expression there. I snatched it away in shame.

.

My heart does not belong to me, nor to anyone else. It declared its independence from me before it turned into a stone.

.

Does the man who shouts ‘God is great’ over the body of his victim-brother know he is an unbeliever, since he sees God in his own image: smaller than a fully-formed human being?

.

The prisoner, eager to partake of the legacy of prison, hid the smile of victory from the camera but did not succeed in suppressing the happiness flowing from his eyes. Perhaps because the hastily prepared text was more powerful than the actor.

.

What do we need the narcissus for, since we are Palestinians?

.

As we don’t know the difference between a mosque and a university, because they are both from the same root in Arabic, why do we need the state, since states pass just as surely as time?

.

Big notice on a night club door: We welcome Palestinians returning from battle. Entry free. Wine undrinkable.

.

I cannot defend my right to work as a shoeshine in the street, because my customers have the right to think I am a shoe thief – this is what a university professor told me.

.

‘I and the stranger against my cousin. I and my cousin against my brother. I and my shaykh against me.’ This is the first lesson on the new national curriculum, in the vaults of darkness.

.

Who enters paradise first? The man killed by an enemy bullet or the man killed by a bullet from his brother’s gun? Some religious scholars say: ‘Your enemy could be your mother’s son.’

.

Religious scholars were perplexed over the identity of those lying in adjacent graves: were they martyrs for freedom, or victims fighting one another in the futile drama being enacted? They were unable to decide, but agreed on one thing: God knows best.

.

The killer is also killed.

.

He asked me: ‘Should a hungry watchman defend a house whose owner has gone on holiday to the French or Italian Riviera – never mind which?’ I said: ‘He shouldn’t.’

.

He asked me: ‘Does I + I = two?’ I said: ‘You and you are less than one.’

.

I am not embarrassed about my identity because it is still in the process of being invented, but I am embarrassed about some of what Ibn Khaldun says in his *Muqaddima*.

.

From now on you are somebody else.

From now on you are you

Mount Carmel, in its lordly position, looks down at the sea from on high, and the sea sighs, wave upon wave, like a woman in love washing her proud beloved's feet.

.

As if I haven't gone away. As if I have returned from a short visit to say goodbye to a friend, only to find myself sitting waiting for myself on a stone bench under an apple tree.

.

Everything that was in exile apologises, on my behalf, to everything that wasn't in exile.

.

Now, backstage at the theatre, a virgin in her thirties goes into labour and gives birth to me in full view of the set designer and the cameramen.

.

Many waters have flowed through the valleys and rivers, and many plants grown on the walls, but oblivion has migrated with the migrating birds, northwards, northwards.

.

Time and history make alliances sometimes, and fight one another at others on the borders dividing them. The tall willow tree pays no heed, for it stands on the open road.

.

I walk lightly so as not to crush my cheerfulness. I walk heavily so as not to fly. In both cases the ground protects me from disappearing into adjectives that cannot be used to describe it.

.

Deep inside me there is a hidden music, and I am afraid of it being played solo.

.

In order to rectify the mistakes I have made I am compelled to do extra work on the draft plan for belief in the future. Those who have made no mistakes in the past do not need this belief.

.

Mountains, sea and air. I fly and swim, as if I am an air-sea bird. As if I am a poet!

.

All prose here is primitive poetry lacking a skilled craftsman, and all poetry here is prose accessible to passers-by.

.

With all the happiness granted to me, I hide my tears from the strings of the oud that lies in wait for my death rattle, and creeps up on young girls' desires.

.

The private is public. And the public is private . . . until further notice, a long way from the present and from the meaning of the poem.

.

Haifa! Strangers are right to love you and compete with me for what you possess, and forget their own countries when they are near you, because you are just like a dove building her nest on the nose of a gazelle.

.

I am here. Anything more than that is rumour and slander.

.

Oh time! Healer of the sentimental, transforming wounds into scars, and scars into sesame seeds. I look back and see myself running in the rain. Here, and here, and here. Was I happy without realising it?

.

This is distance: an exercise for the sight in the workings of perception, and metal burnished by a distant flute.

.

The beauty of nature has a civilising influence, except on those who are not part of it. Mount Carmel is peace, and the gun is discord.

.

I walk aimlessly, not looking for anything, not even for myself in all this light.

.

Haifa at night – the senses going about their private business, far away from their owners sitting out on their balconies.

.

Oh, spontaneity! Harder than metal and stronger than proof.

.

I flatter my critics and treat the wounds of those who begrudge me my love of my country by creeping quietly along using multi-faceted metaphors.

.

I couldn't see a general to ask him: 'What year did you kill me?' but I saw soldiers sipping beer on the pavements and waiting for the end of the approaching war, so that they could go to university to study Arab poetry written by the dead who have not died. And I am one of them.

.

I felt that I knew the way to the park called 'The Mother's Garden' because I had walked on Mount Carmel before, and that this return visit was echoed in a sentimental song, which was unfinished because it was so eager to capture a renewed sense of loss.

.

There is no mist. It's just a pine tree on Mount Carmel whispering to a cedar on Mount Lebanon: 'Good evening, sister.'

.

There is a region in my heart, uninhabited, which welcomes children looking for an unoccupied area to pitch their summer camp.

.

I cross a broad street to the wall of my old prison and say: ‘Greetings, my first teacher in the laws of freedom. You were right: poetry is not innocent!’

.

Did somebody once say that the master of words is the master of place? This is neither vanity nor a game. It is the poet’s way of defending the value of words, and the stability of place in a language which is vowelised and therefore mobile.

.

The smell of trees in summer has an erotic scent. Here I was entwined with grass, down, freckles and similar things in the moonlight.

.

Haifa says to me: ‘From now on, you are you!’

OceanofPDF.com

archipelago books
is a not-for-profit literary press devoted to
promoting cross-cultural exchange through innovative
classic and contemporary international literature
www.archipelagobooks.org

OceanofPDF.com